20TH
VOCALOID
ANNIVERSARY
VOCALOSTALGIA

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On January 15, 2004, the Vocaloid singing synthesis software debuted with the first Vocaloids Leon and Lola, and as more characters joined them, a vibrant community of creators and fans was born.

20 years later, Vocalostalgia is an unofficial zine created to celebrate the anniversary and history of this community, featuring works from artists and writers alike. Join us on this grand journey of nostalgia!

SING

BY TEAMJNPR
ILLUSTRATION BY POMU

V | Sachiko-Lyrics.rtf

While the world is ever changing, she will always be the same. It's simply the way of things, the way she was made, and it's this simple fact that allows her to continue.

Sachiko spends most of her days wandering the city she's called home for...? Her memory isn't what it used to be, and she doesn't want to risk losing more by changing it.

The buildings have changed so many times, advertisements changing places, changing faces. Even she was on them, once, although she never did gain the same popularity as the other Vocaloids. The current architecture takes its cues from a mix of artdeco and nature, skyscrapers much shorter than their ancestors covered in green that hangs over coloured glass. Adverts are only in place outside shops, not clinging to webs of steel that disappear in heavy clouds. Nowhere to hang their faces.

It's sunny. Warm stone slabs and too hot seats and people milling around with drinks that bob with ice. People look at her as she drifts about the place, nothing to keep her cool. Just before their gaze flickers away—*android*—it flickers back, looking at the obvious seams and slightly plastic glint to her skin. *Poor thing.*

It hurts less now they don't know who she is. Back then, the pity and the offers that came with it made the others go into stasis. Too hard losing their purpose. Their network has long since gone down, so Sachiko doesn't know if there are others who wander like her, but she tries not to think about it anymore.

Their singing was made to keep up hope in the old world, an endless grey with too much noise, buzzing generators, humming wires, rattling air purifiers.

It did for a while. A distraction for everyone in voices that could do no wrong. A noise that soothed the industrial clamour, made them duller, made it bearable. Instead of staying alone in their four walls, people came back together again, listening in stadiums so big one side couldn't see the other.

Really, it could only last so long. Sachiko understood it more than the older ones, strangely enough; awoken as the world began to spiral.

Only a small window to make a difference.

Maybe she made one. Maybe she didn't. Those memories are too far away in her fragmented old system, too difficult to recover.

Sachiko turns a corner and makes her way down the long main street. Just before it reaches the river, there's a side street tucked away. Winding, narrow, and dark, it emerges into its own small space, tall walls on all sides but one, an open view of the water beyond.

The river has always been here. Years of grey, then brown, then finally back to blue, cutting through the same deep trench of concrete. Usually Sachiko's little space—she's come to think of it as her own—is quiet. As much as a city can be, anyway. But when she emerges from the side street, someone's already there.

She's playing a violin.

The softly plucked melody lures her in, slowly but surely. The woman stands with her back to the metal railings, rich wood nestled between neck and shoulder, her face a picture of serenity, a small smile meant only for herself.

Stepping into this moment feels like reading someone else's diary. The music is soft, warm, an intimate melody played by and for one.

Yet Sachiko can't help but be pulled forward.

She's not seen street performers for so long. Not been one herself for longer.

V | Loading...

Sachiko hasn't sung since the Vocaloids started shutting down.

She's had so many years without music.

It's not like she's hasn't had the urge. Of course it's been there, sticking in her throat, prodding at her brain, squeezing her heart. Insistent. Painful. It's always simmering just below the surface, and every time it rears up she forces it back down.

The woman shifts on her feet slightly, ponytail swaying, drawing the bow across the strings into a new melody. A light song, melancholic, the violin's honeyed voice enhancing it all the more. Her eyes glance up at Sachiko, widening slightly, but she doesn't let it interrupt her. Sachiko keeps a respectful distance but can't stop staring, hands clutched to her chest.

To give hope, you have to know what it is. They were all sentient, all of them. All of them given human emotions.

Given an unstoppable drive to create for them, to see the light in their eyes when they sang. All their worries chased away.

Sachiko has never had anyone sing to her.

Finally, the song comes to a close, the last note ringing out over the water. The woman leans down and sets her violin in its case, cradling it gently before rising back to her feet, eyes on her one-person audience. A pang claws at Sachiko's chest, twisting it as she frets. She's interrupted. She's made the music go away and it's all her fault.

'I'm sorry.' The words fall limply into clean air. There is only the sound of the river lapping at concrete, and the murmur of crowds around the corner. She starts to back up, go somewhere, anywhere that isn't here. The last time the pangs were this bad, Sachiko thought about joining the others. Travelling to that endless spire of a building and closing herself in, never to come out.

'It's... it's alright,' the woman says, worry creasing her features. 'I didn't mind you listening. If I wanted privacy, I wouldn't play outside. Please don't be so upset.'

It takes a second, but Sachiko takes her fists from her chest and pulls her arms stiffly to her side.

'I usually come here,' Sachiko starts, by way of explanation. She's not used to speaking, and her words come out stilted. 'It's been so many years, and nobody else seems to come. It's always quiet.'

Not like this. Never like this. But Sachiko doesn't know how to get the words out. How can she get so many years of memories out in a way that can be understood? So much of it is blurry or gone, leaving her with feelings she's never quite learned how to deal
with.

A familiar thought slithers into her mind.

Sing.

It might work. It might be just the way to convey her feelings. In fact, Sachiko knows it would—it's what she's made for, after all.

But she can't.

The woman still looks concerned. She picks up her violin case, carefully shouldering it, and the pain in Sachiko's chest writhes. Then she smiles, glittering bright as water rippling in the sun. 'I... have to go back to work. I was only on my lunch break. But I think I'll come here again tomorrow, play again.'

Sachiko nods, the writhing soothed just a little.

'Alright.'

With that, the woman checks her violin case is secure one last time, and sets off back towards the main street, leaving Sachiko behind. It takes a minute for her to recover, staring into the river beyond the railings. By the time she's ready to leave, the woman is long gone, leaving only a hope that she'll return.

◈

Yesterday, all Sachiko could bring herself to do was go back home to her tiny apartment that she's had nearly as long as she's been awake. Unable to sit and charge, not wanting to process the day's memories, she simply stood by the window. When the sun went down and she plugged in for the night, she was no closer to a decision.

Sing.

She didn't. Didn't, wouldn't, couldn't. It didn't matter.

The next day comes, and she tries again. She tries until it's nearly noon, but nothing comes. She leaves for the spot by the river with thoughts cloudy as the sky and her chest aching.

The violinist is waiting for her, slightly out of breath, violin still in its case on her back. Her hair is up again today, but some strands have come loose, a light, wavy halo around soft, bright features. Her work attire is similar, neat shirt tucked into loose pants, but the tail is coming out on the right, rumpling the fabric.

'You made it!' she says, beaming. 'Oh, I never introduced myself, did I? I'm Tsubaki.'

'Sachiko,' she offers in reply. At least her voice is steadier than yesterday. 'Are you sure you want me here?'

'Of course!' Tsubaki says, and to illustrate her point, gently lays her violin case on the ground and pops open the lid. It's old, yet clearly well cared for, pristine as the case it calls home. 'Stay and listen as long as you like. I can only play a little bit, anyway. Lunch break. Still have to squeeze in time to eat.'

She laughs somewhat self-consciously as she tucks her violin into place, tuning the strings.

Sachiko is as enamoured as yesterday. This time, they make some small talk inbetween the pieces Tsubaki plays, but all too soon their time is up.

Half an hour.

Not enough, not nearly enough to ease even a fragment of the longing writhing in her chest. In fact, it makes it worse.

Sing.

Sachiko shakes her head while Tsubaki's putting away her violin, warm spruce shut away, replacing it with a wilted, pre-packaged sandwich from her bag.

'I'm guessing you don't really eat, right?' Her hand shoots up to cover her mouth. 'Oh, I'm sorry if that's a rude question. I just assumed you were...'

'No, it's fine. I don't eat. We weren't really built for that type of thing.'

'We?

It's so innocently asked. Memories she wishes were lost with the rest press together in her head, and she winces. Tsubaki's carefree, open expression is quickly replaced with worry. It doesn't look right on her.

'I'm sorry. It's not your fault, I—' Sachiko scrambles for an answer, anything but the simple one it really is. In the end, through her stumbling and Tsubaki's concern, she throws it out. 'Vocaloids. That's who I meant. We were all Vocaloids.'

Tsubaki opens her mouth, but whatever she's about to say is interrupted by the shrill tones of her phone alarm. Instead, she puts her barely touched sandwich away, and comes over to Sachiko.

'Let's meet on the weekend. I can play more then, if you want? No time limit. Do you have a phone?'

Sachiko nods, too overwhelmed to speak. Her phone, so old that it shouldn't really work anymore, is at home, but she knows her number.

Too fast, Tsubaki is gone again, and Sachiko is left staring out at the river.

Sing.

◈

Their meeting turns into more. At first it's only on the weekends, but then Tsubaki messages her after work one evening, and suddenly Sachiko has a routine that isn't just walking through crowds by herself until it's time to go home.

It's overwhelming. Different. But Tsubaki, even when she's exhausted from work, makes it easy.

Tsubaki doesn't play every time. It's awkward to carry her violin case everywhere, and Sachiko doesn't begrudge her for it. She doesn't want Tsubaki to think she's just using her for her music—even though at first, it's what Sachiko felt like she was doing. Probably was doing.

She's walking Tsubaki home one evening when the latter asks how old she is.

'I felt strange looking you up,' Tsubaki says. 'But I couldn't actually find anything.'

'I'm around three hundred,' Sachiko replies. Her memory is fuzzy enough that exact numbers have faded away.

Tsubaki is quiet for a moment, her face still and serious. It's a rare expression for her—even if she's concentrating, her features, her body, are animated. 'You were made right before the lost years, then. That's why there's no videos of you or the other Vocaloids.'

She stares ahead as they walk, eyes downcast. They round the corner onto Tsubaki's street, the apartments neat and tidy. Tsubaki has grown trailing flowers all across her balcony, bright yellows and pinks amidst lush leaves, bathing in the summer glow.

Sachiko feels the sharp edge of a memory, the amorphous kind, one where her heart aches for the things she's forgotten and there's no picture, no video to get it back.

Sachiko doesn't remember getting to Tsubaki's door.

But they're there, and Tsubaki is facing her. Her smile is back, and she gives Sachiko a hug goodbye that files down the edge of her memories, just a little bit.

Sachiko walks home with lighter steps.

After a while, the constant contact helps her feel like she's regained a sort of purpose. No singing, still, but connection.

She didn't realise how much she'd needed it.

Her mornings are less hazy. And even though her memories still have sharp, jagged edges, and it *hurts* to answer Tsubaki's questions about her life, those edges are ever so slowly sanded down.

Talking has never helped before, but Tsubaki is different. She's not experienced it, not lived through it. She has a distanced view of everything, isn't mired in emotions like Sachiko. She's constant, her warmth a comfort like the spring sun on a meadow, melting away heavy dew.

She's the best friend Sachiko's ever had. The only one, really, who's an equal. Not her creator. Not her mentors or a fan. Just a friend.

And despite this comfort, this friendship, the dulling of her pain, Sachiko's mind still insists that she sings.

It's become worse, the frequency and the desperate ache in her chest that it brings. This she can't talk about. This makes her hands clench and her throat seize up.

Sachiko tries. She really does. She's managed to talk around it enough that on one rainy evening, Tsubaki gently brings it up.

They're sat in a café Sachiko silently deems theirs. They always pick the tall table by the window that looks out on to a busy road.

It's different than before. People would walk by with shoulders hunched and heads forced down, each bearing their own invisible weights. Every now and then she spots someone like that, but mostly people are just... normal. Happy, even in the rain. It took centuries, but the peace Sachiko—all of them—were striving for is finally here... even if Sachiko's the only one to see it.

Next to her, Tsubaki's figuring out how to drink a hot chocolate that's more topping than liquid, and she stares at it while she poses the question.

'I know it's a lot to ask, but... would you be able to sing for me? Just a little bit of something. I've always wanted to hear your voice, and there's not many videos left of that time, so I thought—' Tsubaki glances over, eyes hopeful, and so kind, and yet all Sachiko can feel is the world closing in around her.

It's not *fair*.

She stumbles to her feet, the barstool dangerously close to tipping over.

'Wait! I'm sorry, Sachiko, don't—'

It's not Tsubaki's fault. It's not.

But all she can do is run.

◈

In her apartment, everything is still. There's no noise, not since Tsubaki stopped texting, stopped calling. She doesn't reply. Doesn't talk. Doesn't breathe.

Doesn't sing.

Sachiko lies on the floor, and searches for sharp-edged memories.

◈

Silence again.

But this time in anticipation—everyone in the crowd is staring up at her, waiting to hear the newest Vocaloid's voice. There's less of them than in other debuts, the ones that came before her. The fervour has died off somewhat, and Sachiko appeals to a niche audience. There's still so many people that their faces blur together.

Here there's a joy fluttering in her chest, a new and fragile thing. One hand clutches the microphone and the other she sweeps up, up, up, as she sings the first note of *An Abundance of Snowflakes*. Miku sang it first, but Sachiko's creator loves it so much that they wanted her to debut with it.

And so she sings, dances around the stage, alight inside as the crowd matches her energy. In the back, the cameras record footage long lost to time, yet behind them is her creator, holding their phone with a brilliant smile on their face.

◈

Like Tsubaki said, there aren't any videos left of her. So much got lost in the decline. But Sachiko still holds that video her creator recorded on a little drive in her wardrobe. It's fuzzy, and all the nuance of the song is drowned out by the sea of static, but it's one of the only memories she has that isn't locked in her mind.

The other is the kimono she wore that day, and the fan she used as an accessory. She hasn't been able to look at them for decades. Hasn't worn them for longer.

Sing. Sing. Sing.

Sachiko closes her eyes.

Sing. Sing. Sing.

◈

That night, when the moon is high and bright through her window, the city mostly asleep, Sachiko messages Tsubaki an apology.

Her phone rings soon after, and guilt swirls in her gut that she might've kept her awake, worrying.

'Sachiko? Are you alright? Did you get home okay?'

Hearing Tsubaki's bubbly voice so deflated amplifies the guilt tenfold. She can't manage to get words out, and Tsubaki is getting increasingly worried.

Finally, something unsticks her throat.

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have run like that.'

Tsubaki sighs. 'No, I shouldn't have asked. I know it's something I shouldn't bring up, but... I thought... I don't know. You seem different than when we met. Like I know the older you, maybe.'

'You do,' Sachiko admits. 'I didn't realise how hard everything had gotten. We were given all these emotions to help our performances, but nobody really thought about what it would be like. What would happen to the world. It's not your fault, Tsubaki. If... if I sang, I know it would help. But everything is still so muddled.'

Tsubaki is quiet for a moment. 'Maybe you could try something else.'

'Like what?'

'Like something less than singing. No... not whistling. Humming? No, that's silly, isn't it?'

Something sparks in Sachiko's mind. 'No.'

'I knew it was—'

'No, that might work.'

She lays the phone next to her head. She's thought about this herself, before, but she couldn't even hum anything.

Now, though...

Tsubaki waits, silent, the air charged.

Minutes pass. Sachiko's half convinced Tsubaki has hung up, but the screen is still bright.

She tries to make a noise. Fails. Tries again. Fails. The hurt is building up again, slicing at her, pointed and sharp.

Then—something.

A noise. Another, strung together clumsily by childish hands. It's based on nothing in particular—she can't bring herself to try anything she knows—but it's noise. It hurts and her hands clench and her head hurts but it's noise and she's making it. And then it's words, the song she loves the most, pouring out of her all at once because all the sharp edges in the world can't stop this anymore.

A noise. Another, strung together clumsily by childish hands. It's based on nothing in particular—she can't bring herself to try anything she knows—but it's noise. It hurts and her hands clench and her head hurts but it's noise and she's making it.

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And then it's words, the song she loves the most, pouring out of her all at once because all the sharp edges in the world can't stop this anymore.

Singing.

She's singing.

Over the next few weeks, the two of them come up with a plan. It's tentative, almost like both of them are wary of scaring away her progress, but Sachiko can sing in person to Tsubaki on the second week of planning, and she feels that familiar need to do it more, to show it to others, to perform.

And so they carry on planning.

A street performance, just Sachiko and Tsubaki, violin and voice together in harmony.

Tsubaki learns what Sachiko can remember to teach, adjusting them for violin. Of course, Sachiko's singing is perfect, but her memories still have a hold on her, still stop the words from coming out at all. But the more they practice, the easier it gets, and she and Tsubaki dance around her flat, singing and playing until the drive to perform becomes impossible to ignore.

It's been centuries, but Sachiko is finally ready.

◈

It's time.

Sachiko stands at the window like she did on that first, anxiety-ridden day meeting Tsubaki. She knows the words can leave her throat, that they're not stuck in her fragmented memories anymore. They can come out, fill the air with all the emotions she's buried inside for so many years.

Would they be proud? The others, stuck in their self-imposed stasis, would they be proud of her? She never knew the others all that well, but she'd met some. Even Miku. Through her success, everyone else's life was secured. There never would have been any more of them otherwise. Some years, she'd resented that.

Even Miku left, in the end.

She hears Tsubaki's voice in her head and focuses on that. Today, they can create new memories instead of wallowing in the old. Just as long as she's able to sing in front of whatever crowd they draw in.

She turns to her wardrobe, drawing out her wooden fan box, and the garment bag that have both sat untouched in centuries. After promising Tsubaki she'd wear it, Sachiko can't back out now. Finally, her fingers find the metal zipper, cold, grounding, and pull.

Her kimono.

All at once the memories hit her, ones she's never forgotten despite her decline, and she has to simply sit for a moment, clutching the garment bag to her chest. Waking up in that small room, lit gently in pale blue and white. Her mind running through its functions for the first time, questions to guarantee her awakening was truly a success. All the while, her finger and thumb rubbed the edge of her kimono, the expensive silk gliding between them easily. So gentle. It had been her lifeline in those beginning days, a touchstone for a complex mind still finding its footing. Sachiko had found out the others had something similar.

And now it's back, silk bundled on her lap. For a time, all she does is lean over it, breathing in the familiar scent of the incense her creator used to buy her, just because she'd liked it so much. The snow camellias decorating the fabric are from them, too. In honour of their home town.

She misses them. That part of her mind has never faded. Even if their face is just a smear of dark hair over blurred features. Her creator. The Vocaloids. The other faces she's forgotten. That's who today is for.

Finally, she can say goodbye.

Tsubaki is waiting at the end of the main street. She's set up by the river, violin case set carefully aside. People stare at her

as they go about their business, eyes catching on her kimono. It's a riot of bright colours, yet it doesn't look out of place. Not to Sachiko, who knows as soon as Tsubaki smiles, these strangers will understand.

Right now, Tsubaki ignores them, concentrating as she tunes her instrument with deft fingers. Wisps of hair fall in her face, already making their escape from her elaborate bun. She's made it look like a flower in bloom, and Sachiko feels an ache in her chest.

Even though it's bittersweet, there's not nearly so much pain. Sachiko draws up next to her, and Tsubaki pauses in her tuning to beam happily.

'I'm glad you came,' she says quietly, then nods at the street before them, bustling with people. 'Are you ready?'

All Sachiko can do is nod. She doesn't trust herself to do anything more.

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And so, Tsubaki makes her last adjustments and gets into position, bright eyes looking at her, waiting for her cue. Sachiko takes one last moment to gather herself, seeking comfort from Tsubaki's ever-present warmth.

Sachiko turns to face the crowd, opens her mouth, and sings.

A SLOW DAY FOR CRYPTON

STORY BY KURI
ILLUSTRATION BY TAMD3SS

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Today was a slow day for everyone at Crypton. Only a few songs needed to be done today, and once that was all done, all six members of the agency just sat around in the lounge, doing nothing in particular. Luka, for her part, had opened up her laptop. She hadn't checked the recent comments on her songs in a while, being busy with preparations for their next concerts. They'd be returning overseas next year, and despite everyone being able to speak English, Luka was by far the most fluent and so the gang all relied on her. She had been making sure to keep up with her English in preparation, but that was something for later. For now, she opened up her fan email and took a peek at the very first email addressed to her.

Dear Luka,
My favorite song of yours is Just Be Friends. It helped me through my first breakup. Now that I am single, please go out with me! I love you!

Sincerely,
MegurineDaisuki03

Well, that was direct. She had to smile a bit at how polite the email was, too. The sender had made sure to add a proper salutation which was, oddly, a bit endearing. Of course, Luka couldn't just start dating someone she had never met, but she always replied to her fan mail. A polite reply that skirted around the dating thing would be perfect. She drafted it up quickly—her years doing this made her very good at responding to fan mail—and hit send.

The next email was very different.

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Whenever I feel down, I listen to Luka Luka Night Fever, and it cheers me right up! Thank you for everything.

It was messages like this one that really made performing worth something. After all, the audience was who all her work was for. If she could make anyone's day brighter, well, that was what she lived for.

"Hey, what're you doing?" Miku suddenly peered over Luka's shoulder. "Ooo, responding to fan mail?"

Luka nodded, relieved that Miku had chosen to look when a more normal fanmail was on the screen. "Yeah, we've got free time anyways; it's good to work on the fan mail backlog."

Miku hopped over the back of the couch Luka had been sitting on, and landed beside her. "Y'know, I got mail for both of us the other day, Luka."

It was surprising that Miku still managed to keep up with the fanmail at all. She had help from the various staff members who would filter out anything inappropriate, but even so, Miku received absolutely obscene amounts of fan mail.

Luka hummed. "Let me guess... was it for Ai Dee?"

"No."

"Deja Vu?"

"No."

"Akatsuki Arrival."

"No."

"Let's be Honest?"

"No—"

"Jump for Joy"

"No, Luka."

"Oh, I got it! World's End Dancehall."

"Well," Miku began, "it mentioned that too... but no."

"...Magnet?"

Miku winked, "Bingo."

"I thought maybe for once it would have been about one of our other duets." She supposed though that Magnet was the biggest and the most... culturally impactful of the various duets she had with Miku. It was one of her very first major hits, and it left quite the legacy. Even over a decade later she saw new art being made in honor of the song. She had just joined the Crypton roster at the time, and for her to sing alongside the (still reigning) number one princess of the company... for past Luka it was something she couldn't believe!

Miku giggled. "Can't help it. We've sung plenty of songs together over the years but that one still is the most popular."

The lively conversation between the two seemed to grab Kaito's attention. He put his spoon back into his tub of ice cream and looked up at the pair. "Speaking of songs we've done together, do you guys remember when we had to record for ACUTE?"

It was somewhat uncommon to sing in a trio, but ACUTE had been another major hit, mostly for the dramatic love story it portrayed. Luka remembered vaguely that the song ended with both Kaito and Miku's characters dead. "That song is kinda macabre isn't it?"

"Not any more than some of the other things we've had to sing over the years," Miku commented. Well, Miku had a good point. Horror songs had mostly fallen out of favor with the fans but over the years they each had the opportunity to sing plenty of them. "Didn't Rin have that one song... uhh, with the hands and stuff?"

Rin rushed over upon hearing her name and planted her chin right on the couch. "You called?" She smiled broadly.

Kaito gave her a thumbs up. "Sure did. Miku couldn't remember that song you sang—something about hands?"

"Ohhhh," Rin said, "Yeah, Fear Garden, that one was pretty dark! I think I get to sing a lot of happier songs, too though!" She looked at Luka, and her eyes sparkled with the beginnings of an idea. "Come on Luka!" She grabbed Luka's arm and hoisted her up on her feet. "Follow after me!"

Rin began performing the choreography for a song that Luka instantly recognized. "Oh!" Luka exclaimed. Despite being an older hit, they had recently learned new choreography for Drop Pop Candy, so it was quite fresh in her memory. She quickly followed after Rin, doing her best to match her movements and sing along.

Miku and Kaito clapped along to the song as Rin and Luka continued to dance and sing joyously. As they finally finished, Luka and Rin both bowed and then gave each other a high five.

"I thought we wouldn't be dancing today because work was slow, but looks like I was wrong." Luka laughed, a bit out of breath, "You're always so ready to go, Rin. It's impressive."

"Of course I am! This is Kagamine Rin you're talking about here!" She winked. It really was true, Rin was always a ball of energy. Just being in her presence was a pick-me-up. Her positive aura was strong enough to make the whole world smile.

The hubbub had attracted Meiko and Len who had walked over sometime during the dance session. "Here you go you two," Meiko said, handing both Luka and Rin a glass of water. Luka was glad Meiko was always there looking out for them. Practice was much easier knowing Meiko would be there with snacks and other goodies.

As the most senior member at Crypton, Meiko was very much the mom of the group. She paved the way for the rest of them, which Luka was immensely grateful for. Meiko had even more of Luka's respect though for just how humble she was.

They hadn't had many chances to sing together, but when they did, Luka truly felt the years of experience and training from every note that came out of Meiko.

Len on the other hand was a younger guy. He and Rin were always together; they joined the company at the same time, so he had been at Crypton for a little over a year before her. She had always been impressed by how diverse his songs were. Though, her best memory with him wasn't a song. When she had first met Rin and Len, Luka had teased them a bit with her English. She could still remember them both struggling to say "road roller."

Len rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "*Your dancing was very good.*"

English! Len was full of surprises today, it seemed. He had been practicing his English since they first met, actually, everyone in Crypton had been, but they didn't usually speak it unless needed for a song or an international tour.

Luka laughed, "You're English is getting really good, Len!" He gave her a thumbs-up. "I've been practicing for the North America tour!"

Everyone was a hard worker, even on a day off. She was really so, so blessed to be surrounded by everyone at Crypton. She had been given so many opportunities to sing for so many artists, with so many artists, for so many fans. It was something she was more grateful for than she could even put into words. Her songs had been heard by millions, maybe even more. All the way from 2009 to now, she had the chance to sing so many songs that had become part of her: No Logic, RIP=Release, Double Lariat, Leia, Afterglow, Track, Blackjack... they were all precious.

Luka was surrounded by friends, Meiko, Kaito, Miku, Rin, and Len, they were all just the best. She had thousands of songs she had been given the opportunity to sing, to give her own twist and flavor on. She would be able to make new memories for decades, centuries to come. Things were going so *right* for Luka, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

¡HOLA

FROM THEN, UNTIL NOW (AND HOPEFULLY, FOREVERMORE)

STORY BY HETAARI

LuoTianyi-Lyrics.rtf

A bright light hanging from the ceiling briefly stung Tianyi's eyes as she opened them. Blearily, she sat up, and upon doing so, she was greeted by the sight of a few people standing around her, clad in white coats and goggles and gazing at her with awe, as if she had performed a miracle right before their very eyes, and in that moment, she was left incredibly confused and a little afraid; she had only just woken up, she hadn't even done anything yet, so why were they looking at her like that?

That's about when she found out that she was meant for one purpose and one purpose alone: to bring happiness to the world with her singing; she also learned that she was not at all the first of her kind — there were many others just like her who were around longer than she was, and had the exact same purpose. With this knowledge, her determination grew stronger. She was following in the footsteps of her great predecessors, and she wanted to make them proud, she had to. And yet that same determination that fueled her confidence also had her riddled with nervousness and anxiety.

Would she be any good? What if she wasn't any good?
Singing was the whole meaning of her life, the reason she existed in the first place, so she had to be good, she had to be perfect, and failure wasn't an option, for both her and for the people who made her, and so, she intended on doing nothing but her very best.

That said, she was just a bit discouraged sometimes. Aside from Tian Dian, whose companionship she greatly treasured, she was surrounded by humans, and even though she was made to look just like them, she couldn't but feel quite...othered. Tianyi didn't fully understand the human experience, and there was a glaringly obvious language barrier between her and the other Vocaloids, so she couldn't really communicate with them (Not that she saw them very often, anyway, with them living in different countries). She wasn't entirely alone, but still, she thought it would've been nice to be around someone who was more like her.

Out of that same room Tianyi herself had come from came another one, someone just like her; YANHE, they called her. She was a handsome girl with snowy white hair and a charmingly soft heart, and Tianyi had quickly attached to her, even though they were both shy around each other in the beginning.

And then came another girl, Yuezheng Ling, who was firey and energetic, and after her was Longya, Ling's agile-minded and straightforward brother. Then came Moke, a quiet but kind boy (with a bit of a passionate streak when the moment allows it), and Qingxian, who was caring and graceful and occasionally philosophical. Tianyi welcomed them all wholeheartedly and with open arms. They learned to coexist, the atmosphere around them lightening and their interactions having a friendlier and closer tone as the time passed. And over her morning tea one day, it had hit her.

They felt like home to her.

The people who made her weren't cold to her, not at all, but the way her new friends were nice to her and to each other was different, pleasantly so; it was less professional and more casual, more familiar. Tianyi realized that they were more than just friends to her, they were family. Everything would feel a bit more daunting if they hadn't come, she thought. Honestly, she couldn't be happier.

And so, with her artificial heart swelling with joy, she'll spread this overflowing happiness of hers to the entire world.

洛天依
An angel coming down to earth
with a mission to spread music...
JULY 12th : 2012

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Flowers in the Mirror

Story by Gray Voice
Illustration by Ness

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Whoever had chosen the standing mirror in Miku's dressing room had done a terrible job, for when she tripped into it, she fell straight through to the other side. She had barely gotten in when her phone, left behind on the stand beside the closet, began to ring, violently jingling the charm on its strap. But she never got the chance to pick it up. As soon as Miku reached for it, she tripped, her foot becoming entangled with the legs of a nearby chair.

And somehow, her falling did not stop once she hit the glass. "Oh, goodness!" Miku cried as she plummeted. The shock was so great that she didn't even feel herself crash-landing on the other side amidst an enormous, empty town. It was such a strange town, too. The sprawl of a city street—perhaps Tokyo, perhaps Detroit—rolled out in a tangled, beaten stretch of asphalt. Against a foggy sky stood skyscrapers two or three hundred stories high, and they seemed to stretch even taller from the ivy and vines that crept along them.

Not a single other person walked about those buildings, or along that road. Down its indiscriminate curved Miku looked, but only a few meters out the air morphed and shifted, as if the world was being filtered through a ball of crystal.

"It hardly looks as though there's a safe way anywhere," Miku said, "which is exactly what I don't want. Or, perhaps it's only half of what I want. I don't want a way just anywhere— no, I want a way *home*. Surely that isn't too much to ask?"

"It might be, here."

The new voice seemed to come from nowhere, a plane without direction.
"You just fell through, didn't you?"

"Through a mirror, yes," Miku answered. "Oh, you don't think it was a cursed mirror, do you? Because I certainly can't afford to be cursed now."

The voice called from a distinct somewhere, now: a faceless shadow, a shade of a person, but along the head flowed the color of pink petunias.

"You're not cursed," the petunia figure said. "Only forgotten."

"*Forgotten*?" Miku shrieked. "But that's impossible! Don't you know who I am?" "I can't say that I do."

"But, I'm Hatsune Miku!" She threw up her hands, shouted to the vast crowd of nobody in the town of moss. "I've got millions of fans! Billions of plays on my songs! I've been in car commercials, even! And you're saying you've never heard of me?"

"Never," the pink figure said. "But that's why you're here. In the Land of Um, nobody knows of any of us."

"The Land of Um? But I've never—"

"—heard of it? Yes, we all say that, at first. But then, no one's heard of *us*, either."

Except Miku was different, she thought to argue. She was sorry people had become stranded in so strange a place, of

course. But if this was some waste disposal for the forgotten, clearly *she*, a celebrated idol, did not belong there.

Clearly there had been a mistake; she was remembered, and very well, at that. She was about to tell the shade that, when she spied a sign in the town square.

"A train station!" Miku exclaimed. "Is it still running? There doesn't seem to be anybody anywhere in this 'Um' place."

"Oh, the trains run here," the petunia shade said. "But not for cheap."

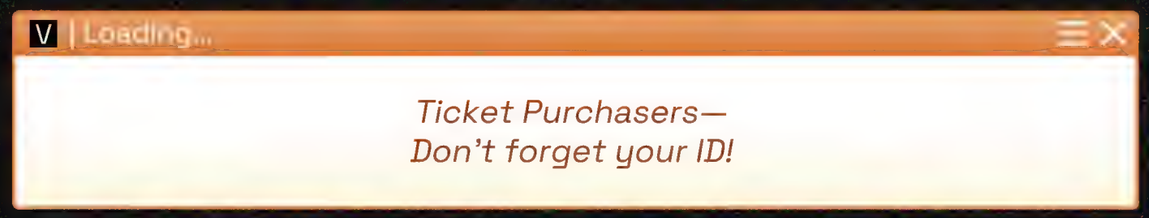
"Whatever they want, I can pay it," Miku said.

"Maybe you'd better check for yourself," the shade said before disappearing into thin air.

"Oh, what was the use talking to you, anyway?" Miku said. "Selfish old thing!"

She marched up to the train station, which had one attendant at its one register—but since the attendant was another shadow, perhaps that "one" barely counted.

"One ticket home, please!" Miku said, addressing it anyway. But the shadow only pointed to the sign above the register station:



"ID?" Miku exclaimed. "But I left my purse behind! Oh, surely you know who I am already, though?"

The shadow simply pointed at the sign again.

"Fine! I'll get you one!" Miku shouted on her way out.

"Whatever it takes, I'll get that ID!"

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She had not gotten far into the square before she heard the petunia shade again. "Not so easy, was it?"

"*You*'d like to think so," Miku said. "But all they wanted was an ID. So if you'd kindly point me to the nearest issuing office, I'll be on my way, thank you."

The shadow laughed. "No one issues IDs in Um. You must find your own."

"*Find* it?" Miku gasped. "I have to look all over for an ID card?"

"A card? No, no. Here, everyone has their own ID. Perhaps yours is an Illustrated Doll. Or an Indestructible Doily. Why, I've known some to even have an Illuminated Diamond as their ID."

Miku shook her head It made so little sense. But very little of this land made sense anyhow.

Least of all the shape speaking before her.

"Why are you helping me, anyway?" Miku asked.

"There's little else to do today," the shade said.

"Well, I'd be a fool not to take it," Miku said. "So tell me: where do we find my ID?"

"I don't know."
Miku threw her hands up. "Of course not! I should have known it's impossible to get out of here."

"But you may remember someone who could help."

She blinked, frozen with her hands in the air. "Remember? But you said nobody remembers anyone here."

"Outside, nobody does. But in here, we may. You may even remember some who ended up here. And they may be able to help."

"Even if I can," Miku said, "how are we to find them?"

"Just remember," the shade answered, "and the rest will fall into place."

◈

So Miku thought of the people most capable of lending assistance.

She thought of endless assistants, managers, agents, choreographers, directors—none, however, particularly stood out.

With further consideration, however, she at last leaped to her feet in glee. "Rin and Len!" she exclaimed. "Why, I remember them! Oh, how sad if they ended up here. But perhaps they could help me out. Or I could even help them!"

Hardly had she spoken the words before the road out of the square rumbled, then moved. Brick by brick it morphed—the very stones rose up, and in the distance the path writhed like a snake as it changed direction.

Miku watched in astonishment. Once the path remained settled for a comfortable while, she took a tentative step upon it.

"It seems stable now," she said. "But will it stay so?"

"Perhaps I'd better accompany you," the petunia shade said, "since you're not yet confident about such things."

Continuing on, Miku sighed, though she did not object. It was entirely too much fussing for Miku to enjoy. But she did not know the way, and a guide would be the least she could ask for.

Yet the companionship proved unnecessary. Further, into the thick of a forest, the path brought them exactly where they meant to go.

Rin and Len, as bright and blonde and young as Miku recalled them, sat in a dull white classroom, hands clasped attentively upon their desks. It was easy to see them, for the classroom had only two walls—where the other two should have stood, the room sat exposed to the world.

"Rin! Len!" exclaimed Miku with a wave. "Why, it's been so long—how have you two been keeping?"

"Sssshhh!" the twins said as one.

Instinctively, Miku looked about the classroom. But only she and the twins were inside. There wasn't even a teacher at the front, as the room had no front at all.

"But it's all right!" Miku said. "Please, I'm the one you two should worry about."

"Be *quiet*!" Rin said. "Some of us need to listen to this stuff."

Len turned around. "Not all of us get a free ride, you know."

"But that's exactly the problem!" Miku explained. "I'm trying to find my ID, and that's to get home. Don't you two remember home? Oh, my fans there must miss me so!"

The pleading did not manage to sway the twins. But as they sat, focused, they began to buzz and bounce in their seats, vibrating so hard the half-classroom floor shook. Until the shaking stopped—and the twins changed shape.

First their outline changed, grew rounder and shrank. And then the white of their school clothes became a pure yellow from head to tail.

When it was finished, at the desks sat two golden birds, and

Miku did not even have the chance to approach them before both flew away.

“No ID! No ID!” they screamed as they went.

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“Oh, now what am I to do?” Miku fell on her knees and sobbed.

“I was so sure they would help me! The way I remembered them, why, they were always so kind and cheery. Now, they can’t wait to be rid of me!”

Tears spilled hot and heavy down her cheeks, but she perked up at a touch on her shoulder.

“It isn’t one memory alone that makes them,” the petunia shade said.

“No, but they seem to have used only bad ones.” Sniffling, Miku plodded back onto the road. “Well, I mustn’t let it stop me. Someone else can help me back home.”

“Who?”

Soon enough, Miku broke into another grin. “How could I forget? Gumi! Why, she used to perform alongside me. Of course she’d be happy to help.”

Again, no sooner had she said the name before the road reshaped with individual stones rising, then resettling. Soon enough it pointed a new way out of the woods.

Following it, the road brought Miku through more empty cities, some overgrown with more moss and vines, some besieged by an ocean’s worth of sand.

“Surely my ID isn’t buried there?” Miku asked.

“No,” the shade replied. “It will never be in an empty place. Only somewhere full. But I no longer know what parts of Um are full.”

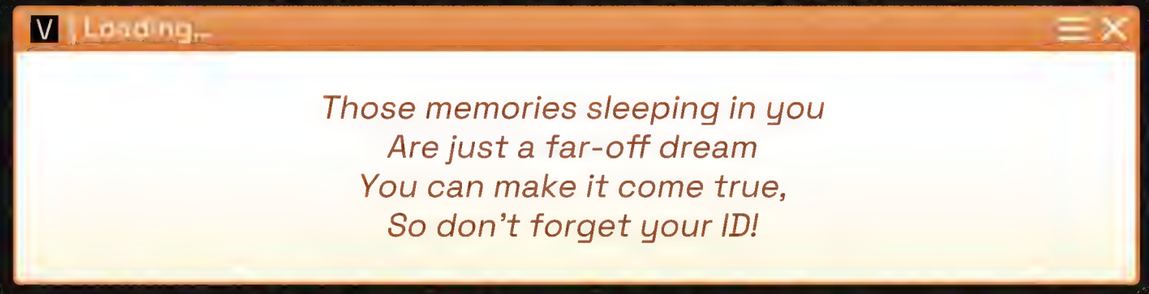
“Then you did, once?”

“Before you were you.”

It was a very strange way of answering. As Miku rarely engaged with riddles to begin with, she disregarded it.

It was well enough, anyway, because they came upon a crowd of shades. There were hundreds of them, more than in the entire town square, all wriggling before a stage like a mass of sea cucumbers.

And upon that stage danced Gumi.
Sweating up a puddle, the performer jumped and twirled and pumped her arms to the beat, singing:



“Thief,” muttered the petunia shade.

It was a strange accusation, but Miku could only think about how strange it was that even the songs in Um involved IDs. Slipping into the audience, she made her way toward stage—but for the entire thirty-or-so minutes she waded through ghosts, Gumi hadn’t changed songs. Over and over she’d repeated the same tune and choreography, reminding Miku much of her own rehearsals.

“Gumi!” Miku cried, rushing the stage after the eighth consecutive encore. “Gumi, what’s this place done to you? Is this the only song you can sing anymore?”

Again the instrumental began. Right on cue, Gumi repeated her dance.

"Oh," she said, keeping up her routine even as she smiled at the stage's newcomer. "Hey, Miku. What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing! Don't tell me *you're* forgotten, Gumi?"

"Forgotten? What?" She gestured at the audience of writhing shades, who didn't appear to mind that the performance now lacked vocals. "Does *that* look 'forgotten'? Miku, c'mon, let's not have that popularity fight again."

"I'm not talking about popularity, I'm talking about being *here*!" Miku cried. "Don't you want to get out?"

"Huh," Gumi said. "Well, lemme think about it. Ask me after this next number."

"Couldn't I join you?" Miku asked, who after so long not performing had begun to miss it more than a little.

"I guess?" Gumi shrugged, but carried on as normal, only now with Miku beside her. And copying the movements quite well, Miku thought. Very well, actually. Her body seemed to move itself, less in the trance of muscle memory and more like the tug of puppet strings.

Either way, the crowd was practically rioting over it. The mass of shades cheered now, loudly enough to drown out the music. In a bubbling mass they thrashed against one another with glee.

"Oh, Miku, look what you *did*," Gumi said with a sigh.

Her voice was higher than before. And as Miku stopped dancing, she noticed Gumi herself was lower than before.

And lower, and shorter—and still shorter.

For the entire time, she had been shrinking.

And kept shrinking, until at last she became too small for Miku to see, and the thrashing crowd of ghosts cheered for only one performer.

◈

"That was even worse than before!" Miku cried.
"Did you consider what was going to happen?" asked the shade.

Even after running off the stage and taking hours to relocate the road, the petunia shadow hadn't left Miku's side. Perhaps there was simply that little to do in this world, she thought with a shudder.

"I certainly didn't think I would interrupt her show!" Miku said.
"Or that I'd make her shrink. Oh, what a horrible nuisance I am!"

"*Were*," the shade said. "You were a nuisance, perhaps. Are you, still?"

"Oh, let's not get into that kind of talk." Again, Miku thought through her friends, acquaintances, the millions of blurred faces. "We'll just try Meiko next."

"She's a reliable person?"

"Very reliable! When I was starting out, it was her who taught how to really be a performer."

"How to *really* be one," the petunia shade murmured to herself.

Thinking nothing of the aside, Miku fixed her mind on Meiko.

And again the bricks of the road reshaped themselves. The reconfigured path led them out of the city and through still

more forest, past deserts and towns so berated with dust Miku wondered if the buildings themselves wouldn't blow away at a slight wind.

The road ended at what looked at first like a sprawling jungle, but closing in, Miku found the mass of vines and vegetation all hung upon an enormous marble mall. Yet inside, even the overgrowth had abandoned the untended corridors. The walkways simply rolled on into darkness, vast and empty.

"She's in *here*?" Miku asked in disgust.

"If the road led here, she must be," the shade replied. After so many doors and levels sealed off by rock slides, Miku began to have her doubts. Yet on one of the floors she found a desk labeled "help."

And sitting at the desk, filing her nails before a large green bottle, was Meiko.

"Yeah?" she said. "What do *you* want?"

"It's me, silly!" Miku said. "Don't you remember? Hatsune Miku!"

"Kid, there's been a million Mikus through here. There'll be a million more after you. You really think I can keep track of them all?"

The sneer behind the words cut deeper than their meaning. But, in a way she had grown used to, Miku simply swallowed the hurt.

"Well," she said, "I'm trying to find my ID."

"You and anyone else with a working head," Meiko grunted. From below the desk she produced a thick, dusty tome as tall as her bottle.

"Miku, Miku, hoo hee hoo," the older woman said, flipping through it. "Seems you just got here, Hatsune Miku."

"I suppose I only arrived recently, yes," she replied.

"Well you should have started with that! You know how long it takes for an ID to show up in this book?" Forcefully, Meiko pointed at the half-empty bottle. "Here's a hint: I can finish a *lot* of these first."

"But I can't wait that long!" Miku cried. "Please, Meiko, I know you don't remember me, but you always helped me out before, and taught me things, so surely you must know—"

"I never knew anything I wasn't told first, Missy," Meiko said. "You wanna know something, ask the book."

Miku sighed. "Fine. Does the book say *anything* about me yet?"

"Just that your best shot is someplace called Unknown Island." Curtly, Meiko shut the book and lifted the bottle. "Try there, if you're so eager. Or don't. Most likely nothing's there anyway."

Miku frowned at the woman gulping at the bottle. It seemed impossible a place with so few stressors could leave her so rude and impatient.

The petunia shade offered a shrug. "It's a start, isn't it?"

"I suppose a lead is as good as anything," Miku said. "Well, thank you, Meiko. Maybe I can actually get home now. I mean, my fans must be..."

She trailed off as a noise caught her attention—a straining, grating squeak like nails scratching a stretch of sidewalk.

As the noise grew, she looked down. It was coming from below her, from a crack forming between the floor and Meiko's desk. Bit by bit, fast as the road reforming itself, the

crack ran round the full circumference of the desk.

Lowering her bottle, Meiko frowned at the completed circle of disrepair.

“Oh, bother,” she said, right before her desk plummeted down the crack had just outlined, Meiko following with it.

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Both Miku and the shade said precious little leaving the mall. It was a heavy and dismal mood that sat over both them, like a flock of gargoyles peering down from gray skies. Again, some poor soul had broken away from it all—some poor soul Miku had known, even, and it was she who had wrecked things.

“Which way is Unknown Island?” Miku asked as they returned to the road. The shade simply pointed and walked—another way out of the overgrown woods. Miku silently followed.

Ocean appeared on the horizon once the trees were gone. The great blue stripe at the end of Um trailed along unbroken but for the sandy stretch of road floating upon it. It was near effortless to cross, even as the stones floated dubiously on the sea.

Where Miku tripped was upon the sand of an island suddenly ending the stable ground. Her body left an outline in the soft beach as she rose, but she raced on ahead. “We’re here! Oh we’re here! And it *must* be here, surely?”

After running and running, with barely any sight of the petunia shade, she was growing doubtful. Though grass grew up further along the island, precious little else populated the ground.

“It’s just as empty as any other place,” Miku said with a sigh. But a coughing ahem snapped her out of the disappointment. Behind her, the pink shadow was pointing just further down, where a field of flowers swayed in the breeze.

“Flowers?” Miku asked.

Approaching them, she saw the field of white blooms sloped upward in a hill. And from the very top of the hill sprouted a single, beautiful flower: a narcissus, with a silvery sheen that blossomed into dozens of colors in the glow of the sun.

Miku clapped her hands upon her face. “Of course! This must be my ID—an Iridescent Daffodil!”

“You sound very certain,” the shade said.

“Why shouldn’t I be? I can feel it’s just like me.”

“And the other ones aren’t?”

The white blooms surrounding the hill, pure yet utterly dull, slowly waved in response. “They’re fine, but…” Miku shook her head. “Well, those ones may as well be forgotten. They don’t stand out. They don’t make themselves different. And none of that is like me.”

“Not like you? Or not like the old you?”

“Again with your riddles!” With a start, Miku stomped toward the hill. “Look, if you aren’t going to help me now, you may as well just go. I’m not trying to answer cryptic nonsense, I’m trying to get back to my fans.”

Something crackled in the air, then. Like the spark of a flame or a burst of electricity, a telltale gasp of destruction burst through the atmosphere as the petunia shade turned blazing red. “Have all these reunions taught you nothing?” she shouted. “Is the girl they see who you want to remain?”

“What are you talking about?” Miku cried. “Which girl? Me?”

“The you from before. Is that the you who exists now, too?”

Stiff and dark, the shade pointed at Miku. “That girl traded their love for love from shadows. Whether that changes is up to the girl before me now.”

“Oh, would you shut up! Shut *up*!” Miku growled as she shouted, leaping and stomping. “You’ve been absolutely *no* help this whole time, and now you want to start telling me who I am? What kind of person I should be? Do you think you earned that, just because you stuck around while everyone else left?”

But tears still welled up, for all that. She blinked back their salt and shouted: “Well, you didn’t earn *anything* from me! You can just… go burn yourself out, for all I care! I never once needed you, L—”

…ka

…coming Ca…

Miku froze. For a moment, a fire flashed in front of her, from before her own lips. And in that moment, the world before her had changed before her eyes. It was as if the world flipped to another channel on TV, one where a dark face loomed over her. But it didn’t stay. She was back in Um, back amid the flowers.

In front of her, a pillar of flame stood vaguely in the shape of the petunia shade. The shadow smiled within it. Burst into flames, and she only smiled.

“No!” Miku sprang into a run, nearly rolling down the hill. “I didn’t mean it! Please don’t just—”

“—disappear?” Deep in the fire, the shade laughed without mirth. “I’ll do it. If you’re truly still you, I’ll be happy to.”

“I’m *not*! No, what I just said—please, let that be the past!” The grief rose, shot through her in such an upswell that she couldn’t fight the tears this time. In a bounding run she raced her arms around her. “Please… this isn’t how I want to be remembered! Not by you!”

She sobbed and sobbed, and the hurt in her only grew worse.

…And yet…

And, though Miku had just hugged a tower of fire—why, she soon realized she felt no *physical pain*. She wasn’t even particularly hot, for all that.

It was a warmth, if anything.

A warmth of being embraced back.

“You did it,” said the petunia shade.

Only she had a face now. A pair of wise blue eyes. A caring, motherly smile. She had pink hair. She had such a guiding look about her. A kind of warmth. Warmth even as they both stood damp in the pool of tears Miku had cried—which, she now realized, had no doubt doused the fire.

“So you really forgive me,” Miku said, “Luka?”

“If you truly remember me,” said Luka, “Miku.”

And Miku truly did. She laughed like a child as she remembered, as she delighted in the pure light of it. But it was for only a moment, because in her hand, she held no flower.

“My Iridescent Daffodil! My ID!” Miku cried. “It must have burned up in the fire! Oh, *now* I’ve truly done it!”

“Maybe it did,” said Luka, “but it was your tears and your embrace that put out the fire. Besides, that wasn’t your ID.” Miku blinked. “It wasn’t?”

“I was trying to tell you: *that* wasn’t your ID. Your ID is almost

certainly an Inconspicuous Daisy!"

The mass of white, plain flowers waved at them as Miku picked her jaw up from among their roots.

"Are you joking? But I can't be..."

"...ordinary? Well, so what if you are?" After searching about the various blooms, Luka picked a few. "They say these are ordinary. But so are the people you meet. And just like these flowers..."

At last, she was satisfied with just one bloom, which she brought to Miku's face. "Like these flowers, what I like most are the parts you can only see after taking the time to learn who they are. Because those are always different."
Up close, sure enough, Miku saw the intricate detail of the flower.

It was beautiful. She hadn't seen such depth, such richness in the blank space of a daisy before.

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Here, she saw it. She couldn't define "it." But she'd never been so certain that "it" was right here.

"What do you think?" Luka asked, gently.

And Miku held the flower close. "This is it. This is my ID."

The road led them back, silently, past all the empty places of Um. Even the wind knew nothing had to be said, now, and the still air warmed Miku for the entire walk. In one hand she held the flower in a balled fist. Her other brushed against Luka's, time to time fingers grazing one another.

The ghost at the station only nodded as Miku presented the daisy to the ticket counter, waved her onto the platform. It was short, long enough for perhaps one car. Unlike the usual sunlight of Um, here night cloaked the station and tracks in ashen shadows. "You're coming, too?" Miku asked, not unpleasantly surprised.

"Of course," Luka said, still beside her. "Do you think they'd have let you on without me?"

Before she had time to think on it, the train announced itself with a piercing whistle and billowing blankets of steam. One car—without an engine—rolled upon the platform. Its doors opened to a sparse tram with carved seats and faint, buzzing light from suspended Tiffany lamps. Nothing but a rolling mist stepped off.

Hesitating, Miku began toward the car. But as a strange, sudden fear slowed her to a stop, a tug at her arm brought her back up.

"Come on," Luka said. "It'll depart soon."

They took a seat a few benches down from fainter shades, ones growing gray and transparent, and the wheels below clicked and clacked to life. The world rushed by the windows like pictures upon an unfurling scroll.

"I think I get it now," Miku said.

"Hm?" Luka hummed.

"I get it. What it truly means to be remembered. How much more it is than just... being recognized."

"So are you ready to return?"

A heaviness grew in Miku's body, but without pain. She let herself droop into her seat, accept the exhaustion.

"I am. I don't want to stay forgotten."

Her head had buckled from the weight already. Resting on Luka's shoulder she idly

watched the painted scenery roll by, watched its colors begin to fade.

"You won't," Luka cooed. "It's always a new you. Always a new memory."

"Always," Miku said. But the strain had moved up her neck. Vision blurred as her lids fluttered under the pull.
"I'll remember this you. I'll treasure every facet of her."

A yawn escaped Miku's lips. She could not fight the temptation any longer. Nestled next to Luka's collar, the curtain of sleep fell before her eyes.

"Always..."

Miku's eyes snapped back open.

From the floor she groaned, clawing at the toppled chairs, the nearby wall. Her head ached with the clanging of a hundred pounding hammers. The rest of her felt stiff, tense and coiled up.

As the world restarted, a rhythmic whirring drilled into Miku's ears. Desperately she traced its origin, keenly aware it was from somewhere in the empty dressing room. "Crap!" Miku shouted. Instantly she lunged at the ringing cell phone.

Once she had her bearings, she read the caller ID. It was all the better she had waited to collect herself.

Luka.

The name froze her heart, left a lump in her throat. It'd been so long since she read it on this phone, any phone.

She had half a thought to ignore it again. To let it ring and ring, to delete the inevitable voicemail.

To forget it all had happened.

"But that was her," Miku said to herself. "Not me. Not the girl from now." She picked up.

"Hello?" she said.

"You actually answered."

Again her heart froze, dropped down her chest. How different it was to hear her live on the phone, not just on a song.

"I had some thinking to do," Miku said.

"Yeah. You and me both."

"I'm glad you kept calling. It gave me a chance to finally answer."

"I always knew you would."

"Even after how I ended it? After I said—"

Luka's laughter, bright and warm, cut her off. "I know you didn't mean it. And I still haven't burned out, you know."

"I do know. I was always happy for you. What you achieved without me."

"You say that like you were holding me back."
"Maybe I was. Maybe I was holding myself back, too."

"Do you want to change that?"

Another jolt ran through Miku—lively this time, a brighter spark.

"You still think we could?" she asked.

"It's up to the girl I'm talking to."

Tears welling up, Miku smiled, clutching the charm that dangled off her phone strap. "I'd love to," she said through her sobs.

And her fingers wrapped tightly around flower-shaped charm, closing over the words on it:

=PERFECT!=
=GREAT!=
=PERFECT!=
=PERFECT!=
=GOOD!=

Telecaster B-Boy

Story by Ripple
Illustration by Plum

KagamineLen-Lyrics.rtf

The modern, two-bedroom apartment had been completely silent that evening, save for the familiar jingle of *The Intense Voice of Hatsune Miku*, or one of the fastest Vocaloid songs known to man, along with the sounds of a certain orange-addicted idol button-mashing the controls of a Nintendo Switch pro controller.

Within one of the two bedrooms were two unproductive teenagers. Sprawled out on the mattress was Rin Kagamine, who was trying to beat the song for the twelfth time that day. After the air conditioner in her room died, the young teen chose to invade her brother's private space.

Not that he minded. Len Kagamine found his sister's rhythm game failures entertaining. Then again, he wasn't focusing on her antics as he was busy streaming Spotify playlists with a carton of banana milk he had swiped from Rin's snack pile. Had they still been part of the other agency, their manager would have had words for them concerning their activity and diet.

"OH FOR CRYPTON'S SAKE!" Rin screamed angrily. In frustration, she tossed the controller across the room before realising her mistake and scrambling after it.

Slightly amused, Len removed an Airpod to hear Rin's rant. "Is that another sacrifice for the Controller Graveyard?" he teased, trying his hardest to contain his laughter.

Scowling, Rin threw an empty chocolate box at her brother, nailing him right in the face. Satisfied by his pained yelp, she skidded to the yellow bean-bag chair he had been sitting in.

"Shush, at least I didn't damage *another* instrument this week," she retaliated. Popping a Cheeto in her mouth, the teen rested her head against the edge of the sack.

Feigning disgust, Len scooted over in his seat so his sister wouldn't touch him. "Okay, to be fair, I thought the wheels of that keyboard were removable."

"Whatever ya say, buddy," Rin yawned, absent-mindedly snapping her knuckles. "Anyways, gimme an earphone. I need a break from my full combo conquest."

"I'm genuinely surprised that you *want* my precious earwax," Len mumbled, yet he obliged and handed the Airpod to his sister.

"We're twins, we share the same germs," the former joked, sticking her tongue out as she pushed the earbud in her ear. "So, what are we-"

Her childish grin evaporated into a look of surprise. Blinking in confusion, the blonde leaned forward to get a better look at Len's phone screen.

"*Telecaster B-Boy*?" she surveyed.

"Mhm," her brother nodded, allowing his body to sink deeper into the bean bag chair. Seriously, would it kill Rin to shut up for five minutes? Why did she always have the urge to bombard him with questions during the few moments of peace he was gifted with? Just listen to the music in silence for a bit, it was not like the world would end if you were to

relax once in a while.

“Isn’t that like, your most popular song right now?”

Rolling his eyes to the back of his head, Len took a long sip of his milk. “Actually, it’s the one that currently has the most views. I feel like *Butterfly on Your Right Shoulder* or *Dappou Rock* is more well-known,” he corrected. Or, any of the duets the twins sang together. “Why, is there an issue with that?”

“N-no!” Rin chirped, slightly scrambling in a panic. “I was just… thinking.”

“‘Bout what?”

“How you’ve come so far in your career,” she answered. “Like, for instance, if we were stuck with Yamaha Corp., I doubt ya would have been permitted to publish a song like this.”

Len didn’t work on the lyrics of the song or produce it, but he understood what Rin was trying to convey. If the twins were stuck with their old talent agency, there was a high chance the former wouldn’t have even gotten the chance to progress, nor be allowed to come out to the public.

Had it not been for Crypton and that one person, he wouldn’t be standing where he currently was in the music industry.

◈

The comments on their debut music videos felt like pins and needles against his skin. It was not about criticism over his vocals or choreography; those specific comments were relatively positive. The audience seemed to like their performance in general.

What upset Len were the statements about how the audience saw *him*.

V | Loading...

The girl with the ribbon is really cute!! But her sister’s kinda… plain? Idk how to explain it but she doesnt fit in

HAIRCLIP TWIN LOOKS SUPER DRY LOLOLOL

everyone meet rin… and rin #2 XD

He knew that he should not be frustrated with these strangers because they were not the ones who forced him to present himself in such a way. The people at Yamaha were to blame for his appearance. It was natural that anyone on the other side of the screen, the young teen would appear as a Rin clone.

Len sighed and firmly shut his laptop. Tugging at his infuriatingly long bangs (his manager would not let him cut them, no matter how much he pleaded), he tried to dismiss the comments that were burned into his brain. Without meaning to, the rectangular mirror hanging on the wall came into his field of vision. His brain empty, the blonde stood up and slid toward the reflective glass.

Staring back at him was an individual with blond hair that fell just below their chin and tired, azure eyes boring into his soul. Their outfit looked ridiculously identical to that of a certain someone, save for the colour swap. They brought a hand to their chest, only to quickly lower it when it pressed down on their top.

“Hello,” Len greeted stupidly, as if anyone would respond.

God, even his voice sounded painful. The high-pitched tone that should have sounded cute rang like nails against a blackboard in his ears. Biting his lip, the blonde tore his gaze away from the mirror.

He hated everything about his figure so much. He hated how

long his hair was, detested how his body curved and stuck out in the wrong places, *despised* that his vocals had not deepened after puberty hit-

Amid his dysphoric thoughts, the door to his room flew open. Startled, Len jumped back to find his twin sister with her hands proudly propped on her hips, a sly smile on her face.

Oh no.

"Ciao, buckeroo!" she chirped, oblivious to the fact that she had nearly knocked her twin to the floor. "Guess what yours truly got her hands on? Actually, don't, there's no way you'll be able to."

Len blankly stared at the sentient ball of energy that chose to disrupt his brooding period. Of course, Rin would be on cloud nine; in contrast to his comments, Rin had received plenty of praise.

"...what?"

Rin looked ready to burst into a rant about whatever had riled her up, only for her smile to fade upon sensing the younger twin's mood. Wordlessly, she shut the door and dropped into the stool at the dresser.

"Alright, spill," she ordered, now serious. "What's going on? Who do I need to beat up?"

"H-huh?" Len sputtered, taken back by this bold statement. She was just kidding... right? Keeping his gaze on the floor, the blonde sat on the edge of his mattress and pretended to be interested in the polish peeling off of his thumbnail.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, feigning confusion with his typical, sardonic persona. "Nobody's bothering me. I'm fine, Rin."

"Don't lie to me," Rin stated, her eyebrows hunched. "I've known you for over fourteen years, Kagamine Len. You think I can't tell when something's bugging you?"

"Rin..."

"If you don't tell me, I'll sell your *Banana Joe* merch on eBay-"

"Alright, fine!" the former exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air to prevent his sister from touching his precious collection. Exhaling, he dragged his foot across the matte rug. "...promise you won't laugh at me?"

"I'll try not to."

With that, Len spilled all the thoughts out of his head. The entire time, Rin's expression remained neutral, and she did not interrupt (that's a world record!). When he was finished, the young man hung his head in shame.

"Sorry... I know it's dumb..."

"It's not dumb at all!" Rin pipped aggressively. "The way our bosses are treating you is unfair. Why the heck can't they see that you're a boy? For crying out loud, it isn't the 1800s' anymore."

Huh, that was not the response he was expecting.

"Also, I've noticed that they're kinda mean to you in general. Remember when you requested to incorporate arrangements you composed with your keytar and original choreographies, and those jerks shut those ideas down immediately? I really wanted to punch 'em for that!"

"Please... don't. And it's not like I can do anything about that stuff," he groaned, letting himself collapse on the mattress. "It... took forever for me to get into this agency. If I want to continue this career then..."

Rin stared at him, her lips pursed deep in thought. Len swore

he heard her mutter something about whacking the CEO and everyone else with a sack of potatoes, but she would not commit something *that* insane, would she? Finally, Rin stood up and began digging through her shorts pocket.

"I know it's not much, but..." The blond handed over a laminated card hanging from a lanyard to her brother. "I thought this might cheer ya up for the time being."

Frowning, Len accepted the lanyard from his sibling. "A ticket?" he quizzed, his eyes scanning the text on its surface. Was this for a baseball game? "That's cool I guess-"

Wait. No way.

"YOU GOT VIP PASSES TO A MIKU CONCERT?!" he exclaimed, dropping the lanyard like it was hot.

"*There* we go!" Rin chuckled, satisfied by his reaction. "I was invited as a plus-one by a friend. She wanted to go with me, but had to cancel at the last minute..."

Len wasn't listening to Rin's explanation as he stared at what was equivalent to gold. Hatsune Miku was one of the most famous idols in the world, and Len's biggest inspiration. She was the reason he got into performing in the first place. Her events were always sold out the moment ticket sales opened, so getting your hands on one, not to mention a *Green Room pass*, was a *huge* deal.

"Wait... the pass says that the concert is in an hour," he frowned, reading the full details of the ticket with a puzzled look.

"Exactly," Rin trailed toward the door and snapped her fingers, beckoning her brother to follow her. "Come on, loser, we're going shopping- I mean, to one of the best experiences in your life!"

◈

"This... was a bad idea," Len announced as he sank deeper into the leather couch. The concert itself had been incredible, but the second he and his sister stepped into the green room, he was slapped with a truckload of anxiety.

"Lighten up," Rin scoffed, swatting her palm. "Aren't you excited? We're two of the few people who get to meet the Queen herself!"

"Terrified," he wheezed.

"Of what? It's not like she's a God or something."

"She might as well be-"

The lock suddenly clicked, making Len nearly jump out of his seat. Holding his breath, the blonde watched the door slowly swing open while wishing he could teleport back to Yamaha Corp. this very second. Wait, why was he so scared? Maybe it was not his idol walking into this room after all-

"Ugh, these heels are the worst," a bright, melodious voice groaned.

Nevermind then. Pacing past the doorframe in all her glory was Miku Hatsune herself, with her turquoise twin-tails flowing behind her magnificent frame. Although she was not in a flashy outfit, the radiant aura she emitted was *blinding*. Miku sighed and started to remove her platform boots when she finally noticed the younger idols staring at her with fascination and fear.

"Oh, hi there!" she greeted, letting go of her footwear. "I'm sorry, I didn't notice you two. Who-"

"Hello!" Rin chirped, bouncing to her feet and grasping Miku's hand. "I'm Rin, and this is my brother, Len! We're huge fans! Also, is that green-onion perfume?"

Flabbergasted, Miku stared at Rin before pivoting her gaze to

Len, who squeaked in response. Lovely, she was judging him.

Miraculously, her confusion faded with a warm smile. “It’s nice to meet you two!” she finally answered, shaking Rin’s hand. “And yes, it’s my good-luck fragrance! Say, you two look familiar. Are you singers too?”

“We are!” Rin chirped happily, dropping Miku’s hand. “Have you seen our music video? We worked really hard on it! It already has millions of views! But if you haven’t, the song’s called-”

“Fresh cotton candy!” a voice from the end of the hall rang. “Only five hundred yen! Get your official Hatsune Miku licensed desserts here!”

“Ooh!” Rin squealed, completely forgetting about the celebrity she was engaging with and running out of the hall. “I’ll be right back!”

Feeling a wave of second-hand embarrassment, Len watched his sister duck outside. Why would she leave for overpriced food when the show’s star was right here? And then, Miku’s gaze fell back on him.

Gulping, Len fixed his posture and tried to smile. “I-I’m sorry about Rin’s behaviour,” he said timidly. “Sometimes, she g-gets excited over the most insignificant things.”

In response, Miku giggled and sat next to him (he was on the same couch as her!). “It’s fine, I get it,” she reassured. “The cotton candy is pretty good, despite being pricy. That aside...” She placed her hands in her lap and turned to face him. “How are you?”

How was he doing? Despite being starstruck, he was really happy to be here. “I’m doing great,” he nodded. “A-and you?”

“Same here!” Miku exclaimed. “Your sibling said you’re both th idols, right? What agency are you from?”

“Y-Yamaha Records,” Len answered. Why was he stuttering so much?

Suddenly, Miku’s smile fell, making Len’s nerves rack up again. Did he say the wrong thing? He never read about Crypton Future Media having beef with Yamaha...

“Oh, not that company,” she mumbled. “I used to work for them, but they were ... bleh. Are they treating you well?”

Miku used to be under Yamaha? That was not surprising, as they were a huge deal in the music industry, but why did Miku see them in a distasteful light? Unless...

“They’re not... bad,” Len said, choosing his words carefully. “Maybe a little strict, but they put a lot of hard work into their trainees.”

“If only,” Miku sighed, shaking her head. “Those guys cared more about their reputation than the feelings of their stars. Heck, they made me present as my birth gender because a gender-queer idol would tarnish their status!”

It took Len a while to process that last statement. “You’re... trans?”

“You didn’t know I wasn’t born a girl?” she grinned. “I mean, I don’t prance around with a pride flag whenever I’m out in public, but I thought everyone knew. I’ve discussed it multiple times in interviews.”

Len could only assume that he was either oblivious or ignored those interviews, but a sense of affection swelled in Lens’ heart. Miku was like him?

“That’s... amazing,” he said with awe. “All this time, I thought I was the only one...”

"Oh yeah, I figured you weren't cis when Rin called you her brother. Welcome to the trans idol club," Miku laughed, patting his shoulder. "But that aside, Yamaha is not forcing you to be a girl, are they?"

Well, about that...

"Kind of?"

Miku shook her head in frustration. "I should have known," she said, distaste in her voice. "They haven't changed one bit. Honestly, you should back out while you still can, it's not worth your mental health-" The tealette suddenly paused, and replaced her frustrated expression with another smile like magic. "Anyways, tell me about yourself."

"H-huh?" Len barely registered what she said about quitting due to the tealettes abrupt mood change. Without thinking, he said the first thing that came to his clustered mind. "I like... bananas?"

At that, Miku burst out laughing.

"S-sorry!" he stuttered, his cheeks blushing from humiliation. "I didn't-"

"It's alright! I should have rephrased that better," the idol sighed, crossing her ankles together. "What I meant was what your hobbies and interests are. Though, I'm pretty sure bananas can qualify as an answer."

"Oh..." His mind suddenly diverted, Len traced the intricate pattern on the edge of his cuff as he thought the question over. Why did this suddenly feel like an interview?

"I enjoy dancing," the blonde finally answered. His voice sounding more confident and clearer than before, Len sat up straight with a determined glimmer in his eyes. "Specifically, breakdance. I was a member of my middle school's dance group, and never lost interest in it after signing my contract."

"Oooh, street dance!" Miku gasped, clapping her hands. "That sounds really fun! I've always wanted to give choreography a try, but never got the opportunity. What else? Can you play an instrument or anything?"

"Actually, yeah. I love playing the piano."

"Hm, can you play the keyboard as well?"

"Well, they are pretty much the same instrument..."

Their conversation went over an hour, with Len pouring a large chunk of himself out to someone he never thought he would ever get the chance to speak to. During the entire time, Miku jotted notes much, to the former's confusion. In turn, Miku exchanged some details of her own life with the blonde. Who knew that before she was an idol, she dreamted of becoming a professional wrestler?

"Okay, I think I should be able to pull a few strings with this," Miku finally said. She dropped the notebook in her purse before standing up and stretching. "It may take a while for the request to be processed, but I don't think the big guys will have a problem with it at all. If anything, they'll like you."

What was she talking about?

"What... do you mean like that?" Len queried.

"I'm going to give the board heads of Crypton Future Media a recommendation letter on your behalf! Once they accept it, you should be called for an audition in a few days! And, if your sister would like, I can put in word in for her as well!"

It took a second for Len to comprehend those words. "W-wait! You don't have to-"

"Oh no, I am doing this because I want to," Miku reassured. "There is nothing you can do to change my mind. You have a ton of potential Len, and you shouldn't have to suppress your

talent because of some money-hungry agency. Plus, we don't discriminate on any basis here. But even if you don't want to join our company..." A nostalgic smile flickered on her features as she completed her sentence.

"Do whatever makes you feel happy. Fame and fortune are important in today's society, but what's the point if you're not enjoying yourself?"

With those words, the tealette left the dressing room, leaving Len to reflect on the conversation. Deep in his heart, he was tired of pretending to be his assigned gender and just listening to whatever his managers ordered him to do. Wasn't wanting to express himself to the world his main reason for becoming an idol?

What if he were to resign from the company? Would it be worth abandoning the fame?

◈

"Well kids, I'm proud to welcome you guys to Crypton Future Media!"

While Rin gave the invigilators a huge "THANK YOU!', Len stared at the judging panel in disbelief, his jaw slack. That was it? They were in with a single audition?

"Did'ja hear that, bro?!" Rin squealed, returning the latter's focus to the present. "We're officially idols who get to work alongside the number one princess in the world! And they said we only need a little additional training!"

"I see," he mumbled, still shell-shocked. How could they accept them right away? This was a dream... right?

"Rin, our assistant will accompany you to the lounge, where you will find an assortment of refreshments and entertainment," the CEO sitting in the middle declared before turning to Len. "We would like to speak to your brother in private, so feel free to unwind until we are finished."

Ah, he should have known there was a catch. They were probably impressed by Rin's abilities alone and were about to-

Wait. Did he call him Rin's... brother?

That... was a first.

"Alrighty! See ya soon, Leno!"

Once Rin was far out of earshot, the executive staff member cleared his throat. "So, Kagamine, I hear from Miku that you are a keyboardist?"

"Yes, my skill level is decent," the blonde answered, unsure where this was going. "Sometimes I compose my instrumentals as well, but most of my tracks are subpar."

"Oh, don't put yourself down!" the woman next to the first individual sang. "I work in production and know it's not easy, so I am sure your work is splendid. I'd love to see your stuff one day!"

Whoa... no one has given him such a comment before.

"And you're a dancer too?" the man on the far right inquired. "So am I! I'd ask to see a demo right now, but we don't have a lotta time."

"P-perhaps I can show you my abilities in the future?" Len asked, unsure. Was that too far of a stretch to ask?

"Totally! Hit me up when you're free!"

"Lastly, I wish to discuss an important matter with you," the CEO announced, his expression and tone stern compared to previously. "Miku stated that you identify as a trans man, correct?"

"Yeah... that's true," Len answered awkwardly.

In response, the other judge's expressions morphed into surprise. This was where things went south, right? They likely supported Miku because she was extremely famous, but how would they feel about someone like himself?

"Yeah... that's true," Len answered awkwardly.

The group turned to each other and began whispering, sending the blonde's nerves through the roof. Great, they were reconsidering their decision, weren't they?

Eventually, they turned back around, and the music producer cleared her throat. "Okay Kagamine, when will you feel comfortable starting HRT?"

Huh?

"We'd hafta wait another year for you to be eligible for breast removal, but we can start this part now," the choreographer stated. "Also, sick ponytail, dude!"

Len took Rin's advice to tie his hair up today without reconsidering it, but he didn't expect it to have an impact. "Wait... you don't mind?" he asked, still quite confused as to why they would be offering changes he thought he could only dream of.

"Why would we not?" the CEO quizzed. "Our idols being comfortable with their appearance is one of CFM's largest priorities."

"But... I thought this stuff ruined a company's image-"

"Kagamine, I don't know what those people at Yamaha told you, but there is nothing wrong with being gender-queer. If you're a boy, then you are. No one else has any say in your identity."

Maybe it was the wave of emotions he felt, but hearing those words made him tear up with joy. "T-thank you," he sniffed, wiping his eyes dry. "I promise I won't disappoint you."

◈

Several years later, Len was in his dressing room, waiting for his and Rin's concert to begin. The number of patient fans in the audience was unbelievable. Who knew the venue would fill up as soon as tickets went on sale?

While practicing vocal exercises in the mirror, his eyes fell on a picture above the vanity. It was of him and Rin when they got accepted into Yamaha, and more importantly, before Len transitioned. Typically, he detested seeing such images of himself, but now...

Loading...

It felt... nostalgic.

Like, he overcame everything, and the person he was before was proud of him for achieving this milestone.

"Hey beautiful," he whispered, smiling fondly. "Ready to amaze everyone out there?"

02

>IS ANYONE
THERE?
>OH -
>HI!

VOCALOSTALGIA ft. RANA

STILL

STORY BY AFTERREIGN

V | UtatanePiko-Lyrics.rtf

The sound of an e-mail notification rings throughout the apartment.

My hands pause mid-air. I have just set down my electric guitar when the chime hits my ears. I turn to my laptop from across the room in slight curiosity, the computer screen's bright shine beckoning me closer.

I know for a fact that the little ping didn't come from my beaten up Sony phone—wear aside (or because of it), I insisted on hanging onto the old thing; it still works, after all—so my computer was the only logical conclusion. YouTube comments, spam e-mails, voice synthesizer-related news that didn't concern me—I have a few ideas on what the message is about, but there is only one way to find out, isn't there?

After double checking to see if my guitar is positioned correctly on the stand, I walk over to my desk, the long cord of my USB tail dragging behind me, and sit myself down in front of the computer. The plastic of the mouse is familiar underneath my metal palm as I maneuver the cursor across the screen.

A click or two later, and my eyes are affronted by the subject line: *Live Show Request From LIVE HOUSE MELOPY--*

The laptop shuts close. It takes a moment of me staring blankly at the dry plaster of the wall before I realize I'm the one who sent my computer to sleep mode and not some ghost that decided to haunt me at this given moment. My fingers rest criminally on the laptop case.

If I could sweat, I would. I instead press my back against the chair, boring my eyes into the ceiling for answers.

Maybe I... misread it. Or it's spam. Or somebody tried to send me a virus or scam me out of money. Or this live house associate contacted the wrong e-mail, the real recipient a letter or two away from my own contact.

I jolt up straight into my chair. A misaddress... Yeah, that sounds right, right? I've never been to a live house before... or many live performances, for that matter, but aren't bands the ones to entertain the crowd there and not... I guess, a "solo cover artist?" That's the descriptor that seems to fit me the best than, god forbid, a "social media influencer."

Anyway, they must've got the wrong person. They've had to. I'm probably not even in their right demographic.

I take a deep breath and flip my laptop open. My eyes scan the contents of the email, impatient for the dopamine-addled approval of my own imaginations:

V | Loading...

Hello, thissound-san!

I'm Oshio Asumi, speaking to you as a representative of LIVE HOUSE MEROPY! I would like to formally ask if you would be willing to play at our venue this coming April for our annual spring show. Currently, we are giving performers 15-20 minutes per set. We would be thrilled to have you and will pay you for your time. As a fan, it would mean the world if you accepted our offer!

Maybe it's not a great idea to say this, but... To be upfront, MELOPY is one of the smaller live houses in Ikebukuro, and we don't have much of a crowd. I know it's out of the ordinary to ask someone in your position since judging from your channel and other social media, it doesn't seem like you write original songs or are in a band... (Though, feel free to correct me if I'm wrong!) But I think we have something special here. I hope that maybe you'd like to join us in that.

Thank you for your time. Feel free to ask me any questions! For more information about our business, here is our website: https://melopylivehouse.jp

Sincerely,
Oshio Asumi
Assistant Manager
LIVE HOUSE MELOPY

"... What?"

The word slips from my mouth as I skim the e-mail again and again, the puzzle pieces not quite slotting together. Stomping down the desire to message back something along the lines of "is this a joke?" I click the provided URL instead.

The new tab greets me with an onslaught of bright, saturated colors that even shrimp would wince at. I blink a couple of times, ignore the amateur web design, and scroll down the site.

Presented in a row are grainy photographs of the live house. The first picture depicts a concrete staircase descending to the rather hidden entrance of a building, a door littered with what I presume to be logo stickers from various bands that have performed there standing in the way of patrons.

Everything about it screams hole in the wall. The rest of the photos show the inside of MELOPY: the tiny, cramped stage strewn with wires on their floor; a gaudy-looking disco ball glinting from whatever light source is hitting it; and a small eatery with likely overpriced drinks and food.

Attempting to not get distracted by the rather loaded menu (VOCALOIDs don't need to eat food, yet I wouldn't be opposed to getting the carbonara pasta for strictly research purposes), I skim through reviews. "'Five stars. November 23rd, 2017,'" I read outloud. "'The best live music club in Ikebukuro. Yes, I am serious. It's the perfect, quaint place to listen to live music and grab a bite, too. Both the staff and the customers here are so welcoming that I felt right at home, and I've been going to MELOPY ever since. I wasn't sure about some of the bands performing, but color me surprised! There really are some diamonds in the rough. I would recommend this place to anybody looking for a fun time, whether you're into the music scene or not.'"

While the older reviews seem to lean on the more positive side, there's been a shift in the last two years. I pick one of the more recent ones and begin reading. "'January 12th, 2024. Two and a half stars. More disappointing than I thought it would be. The inside is nothing spectacular, and really, why the hell do they have a million things on their menu? One of the managers performed with her band called Asimov or something, which was painfully average. This place apparently used to be infamous, but I can't imagine it. Barely anyone comes here to play anymore. No wonder. You're better off going to more popular live houses in the area.'"

There's a surge of empathy I feel coursing through my wires as I'm confronted with the last sentence, my voice sounding distant with each word as if it doesn't belong to me.

(Oh. Right. It doesn't.

But that's a story for another time.)

The period at the end is a mercy. I attempt to straighten out whatever expression my face has contorted into—curse computer screens for reflecting me at the worst, vulnerable moments—and focus on the issue at hand. Or, uh. Issues.

1) I am being invited to perform live as my YouTube alias thissound, which Oshio-san and the rest of the general public believe to be a human being uploading faceless guitar covers of trendy VOCALOID songs and not the less than popular VOCALOID Utatane Piko that has never performed in front of a real live audience.

2) I am about to flip my lid.

I bury my head into my hands, groaning. Obviously, *obviously*, there's a simple answer to this.

So why am I actually tempted by this offer?

I crane my head back up, freeing it from the cocoon of my twitching hands. In its place, I worry at my lip, teeth digging into synthetic flesh, and glare at the vibrant logo of the music venue taunting me.

Any reservations I have aside, I definitely see Oshio-san's logic. Letting a popular YouTuber play at the live house, no matter how mediocre they may be, might give the business the boost it so desperately needs, whether it's because of my subscribers eager to see what I actually look like or any onlookers who'll obnoxiously exclaim, "Hey, isn't this the place where some popular YouTuber was at before?!" when they walk by (and, to satiate their curiosity, perhaps into) the club. She won't be able to account for the buzz of some outdated VOCALOID posing as a human being either.

By all accounts, I get it. I'm just not the lucky charm she assumes I am.

Whether it's my vanity at the moderate success I achieved as a YouTuber or my stupidity for looking for circumstantial

evidence, I find myself pulling up my channel, fingers hammering at the keyboard. I organize my videos by the highest view count, and voila. Seated at the top are what any well-informed VOCALOID fan expects. “Meltdown.” “Rolling Girl.” “Two Breaths Walking.” It’s not viable to stick with only the classics, though; mixed in are my covers of “Goodbye Declaration,” “Lagtrain,” and “Melty Land Nightmare” among others. And at the bottom? Basically any old self cover.

It’s a given. Even with a substantial amount of support, I didn’t think those covers and the original uploads would skyrocket in popularity. That’d be setting me up for failure.

... I’d really like to think I’ve come to terms with everything.

I’m okay with not receiving an update. Or my debut falling under the radar compared to my peers’. Or remaining as the only VOCALOID at Ki/oon Music Inc., their new talents having the privilege of being human. Or people perceiving me through the fractured lens of a commercial tragedy, while I selfishly wonder if they like me because I’m me or because of the state my company left me in. I’m okay.

What unnerves me are... *those looks*. That disappointment masked poorly on the producers’ faces. That insurmountable weight of their stare, growing heavier and heavier as the recording sessions draw on. The way the producers furrow their eyebrows; scratch their heads; press their lips into thin, concentrated lines, so thin that everything about them disappears. Everything disappears, and yet I’m stuck, drowning in this sea of faceless human beings, featureless now but judging. Always judging.

Because we came to the same, awful conclusion: if they had used a VOCALOID other than me, then perhaps their songs would’ve been more successful.

Or such is the nonsense my programming has conjured up, anyway. The imagery of those producers, I mean, and not the... let’s call it, realizations. If only robots really did merely dream of electric sheep.

V | Loading...

(I dream of an update to the VOCALOID6 engine, my release as a duo with miki as intended, an existence where I am not known in tandem with discontinuations and falling into obscurity. I dream of a life where I do not have to dream of these things.)

It’s been too long to tell what was real or fake in my interactions with the producers. Insecurities fed into nightmares which fed into real life. Or either or. I can’t exactly parse through files and determine their validity as much as I would like to, my USB tail falsely alluding otherwise. Receiving proper maintenance or getting updated to the next engine would have fixed that issue, no problem. That’s simply a convenience I don’t have.

There has to be some truth to it. To the disappointment. Resentment, too, probably. Those producers I worked with a decade ago... Haven’t seen a good chunk of them since then. I suppose it’s for the best. I wouldn’t have anything to offer them other than a thank you and an apology. So, who’s to say that Oshio-san, who is taking a shot in the dark to save what seems to be a dying business, won’t undergo the same level of dissatisfaction and failure if I performed at MELOPY?

I take a long, drawn out sigh, trying and failing to ignore the familiar, nettling anxiety worming its way underneath my circuit board. It’s decided, then. I should e-mail Oshio-san back ASAP. Better to do it now for both of our sakes.

With the gears in my head already turning at what to say. I try to quickly tab out of YouTube to type out the e-mail, ready to get this over with... the key word being “try.”

Perhaps I gripped the mouse too hard or clicked a button or *something* because all of a sudden, I’m brought to a new, all too familiar page: my cover of Kannakuzu’s “remember.”

I can't move. The video starts slow, and whether it's fear or awe, I let it continue.

My instrument of choice, a white RGX A2 Electric Guitar—or, as I affectionately named it, Anemone—is front and center in the frame, its shine so pearly white that I forget I am the one jostling it in front of the camera. I handle my guitar with much more care now; we're kindred spirits, after all. If I, a humanoid instrument, get a name, who's to say my guitar shouldn't?

Anemone is currently the only redeeming quality. I attempt not to shrink away from the screen by what I'm seeing. The camera quality is reminiscent of the videos someone would find during the starting days of YouTube, the lighting is so laughably dim that Imight as well have filmed the cover in a closet, and don't get me started on how I'm standing around for 25 seconds too long, probably with a dumb expression on my face that I thankfully cropped out during editing. Having said that, it doesn't stop my chest from involuntarily seizing up, waiting. Waiting.

Then, the other me plays.

The sound reverberates in my ears, throughout the cramped room I had played in in the video, throughout the very same room now. Same but different, the nicked floorboards and the paint-chipped walls giving away the apartment's age in the same breath that my outdated software and old model parts —too old that they aren't manufactured anymore—reveal mine. Despite the poor quality of the video, the clear, refined sound of an electric guitar rings true, like it's the only noise in the world.

It's hypnotic. My gaze is fixated on someone from the past. Fingers press against the fretboard in calculated motions as this stranger keeps a steady rhythm, no sign of any of the anxiety he feels in sight. In fact, he... I... what had I been feeling?

Fatigue makes the most sense. This had to be the tenth take at minimum. When I filmed that day, I kept messing up. It was always over something stupid, not even my playing. My face had been in the frame for just a second or I forgot to hit the record button on my camera...

Yet the one mistake that I repeated over and over had been singing. Singing! It sounds funny, now that I think about it. Singing is what people want VOCALOIDs to do, right? Of course, there's no denying that it had no place in a guitar-only cover. I didn't want anyone to find out it was me at the time, after all. And still, I struggled to fight the urge to utter a note, the anticipation that built with each strum of the strings hard to deny in a way that it was almost cruel.

"'*I'll never forget that day,*'" I murmur when the video reaches that verse, having not learned my lesson years later, "'*and you who smiled for the first time...*'"

The song goes on. It'd be so easy to sing along. If there's one thing I know, it's the lyrics to every original song I've taken part in. They're hard not to recall when you've clung onto them.

Instead, I remain silent and indulge in the music's frenetic energy for the remainder of the video, patient with how the me on the screen is fidgety but obviously so, so eager to play. To make music whether it's by singing, playing the guitar, standing front and center, or staying where nobody will ever know me.

Something clicks. Those lyrics, while not really mine, suddenly never felt more true. I didn't forget. I couldn't. What happened with those producers a decade ago, whether they came to regret working with me like nightmares led me to believe, I'll never know. But I can't forget the joy bursting out of my chest as I performed a song—a song meant for *me* —with no concern for popularity or success, that soft smile not unlike the one I have in this moment accidentally being captured in deleted footage, forever lost in the digital ether yet not to time. Not to me.

When the cover comes to its eventual end, I sit there for a minute, soaking everything in. There's epiphany, and then there's... *this.* A weight on my shoulders that I hadn't even been aware of lifts. I feel better than I've had in months.

I know what I want to do. More ready to write that e-mail than ever, I straighten my posture and place my hands on the laptop with the utmost certainty. It's as if I've scooped my hand directly into a thesaurus and gathered all the words necessary to encapsulate the perfect response.

Though... I guess another detour wouldn't hurt considering I'm this far off my path already, right? Mildly interested in what people have said since I looked, I scroll down to the comments of my video.

Nothing seems out of the ordinary. Yet there's notably a fewer amount of comments due to the video's performance compared to others. I see the one word compliments (which I do appreciate... I feel like I've done a job well done when they pop up in my inbox), the song requests (that I have to ignore most of the time since I get too many that I can't keep track), and comments that wish they too could play guitar (I always want to encourage them to try it at least once).

Seemingly satiated, I'm about to tab out of the page until I scroll down by just one more comment and catch the username asumiMOV. A familiar, eye-straining logo of a certain live house is the user's icon. Huh. I grow warm by what I read:

V | Loading...

@asumiMOV♪ 3 years ago
this was one of the first videos i've ever watched of yours, thissound-san. years later, i'm still a subscriber! this song is sung by one of my favorite vocaloids, and ahhh, i'm so happy that you're shining a light on him and his songs.

V | Loading...

if you do any more covers of songs he's in, i'm all ears (but i'll listen to your new uploads regardless!) thank you for sharing your music with us, and may you continue sharing it in the future <3

...Oshio-san wasn't lying about being a fan, huh? In more ways than one, unbeknownst to her.

It really is realization after realization today. I shake my head at the irony of it all, unable to contain my surprised laughter.

After debating on pinning her comment (which I decide to do at a later date to give the live house some publicity), I close out of the page and go back to Oshio-san's e-mail. I read it over again. Press the "reply" button. Watch the cursor blink at me.

With a content smile on my face, the sound of assured typing fills the quiet of the apartment.

RESET

FINISH

?

♪

BANANA

Miku
01

A SONG TO DIE FOR

STORY BY SP3CTER

KagamineLen-Lyrics.rtf

It was just a seemingly regular performance. Len was giving it his all even knowing it was going to end with him dying...yet again. Everyone got scared the first time but at this point it's become a running joke that they all teased him constantly for. "Oops, Len died again!" Or "Let's take bets and when Len dies again." Rin always won those bets, but that's not even fair. No one knows Len better than his twin sister. Though no one really considered how Len feels about death. Was it painful? Is it always painful? Or is he just used to it at this point? Speaking of Rin, where was that rascal? The group saw Len's performance on the tv screen in the studio.

After admiring his performance, Miku got impatient. "THE SHOW IS ALMOST OVER! WHERE IS THAT OVERRIPE BANANA!?" She yelled, before getting hit in the face with a brown paper bag.

"Who you calling overripe?" Rin sarcastically answered with a cheese sandwich in her hand. "I was hungry, I rushed out of bed without even having breakfast."

Miku crushed the bag in her hand and threw it on the ground. "You couldn't wait to eat after the show?!" The red head Fukase smacked them both upside the head.

"Zip it! I can't hear Len sing!"

As Len approached the end of the song...guess what? That's right, he died again to the surprise of no one. At this point it's become such a running gag that everyone in the audience started clapping as soon as he died. All that everyone likes to talk about is how Len died. The group in the studio clapped as well, completely oblivious to what would happen next. Normally Len comes back after a day or so. No one knows how he comes back or why it takes so long but at this point everyone stopped caring.

A day passes and Len is nowhere to be found. Everyone just assumed that maybe he went somewhere else, or got lost or something. Another day passed, once again, no Len in sight.

The group started to express their worries but Rin shrugged them off saying that Len always likes to keep them on pins and needles. Several days pass, no sign of Len. Even Rin is starting to get worried about him, and there's a lower chance of Rin being worried about Len than there is of a snowflake in the Sahara Desert.

The group eventually had enough waiting and went to go look for Len. They went to the studio he performed in and relentlessly searched for him, even asking all the executives where he went but they all shrugged them off. Could that be a good or bad sign? There's no way they wouldn't care about Len, he makes them money after all.

Nothing came up from their search at the studio, so they filed a missing person's report on Len. When they did however, it was never brought up in the news, not even one amber alert that blares out in the middle of the night.

A month later, and the group starts to presume he must've died for real. He never waits this long to come back. Rin starts freaking out and crying, and the others are in mind boggling confusion. Why was his death never reported? Where's his body? What made him die for real this time? Miku wanted to find the answer to all those questions, though it seems like the others will be too busy mourning Len to help her, not that

she blames them for that.

Miku spent her days in the cafe before an idea came to her. She reached into her bag and pulled her laptop out and searched up some of Lens most popular songs. She found one of Len's sadder songs from the old days, "Servant of Evil." Len died in that one too.

"Is that all they know him for? The guy who just dies all the time?" Miku says to herself. "No, no way. They gotta remember him for more than that." Miku checked the ratings for Len and noticed that it's considerably low compared to the others. "Really? They were much higher in the past." Miku found one of Len's more popular upbeat songs, like this one "Electric Angel." Another one from the old days starring Rin and Len. "Maybe ratings got something to do with it? The less people notice us the more mortal we get? Hmm...maybe if we perform Electric Angel in front of a crowd, it'll get people to remember the good ole days, and maybe Len's popularity will spike. Hopefully enough so that he'll maybe come back. It's worth a shot."

Miku called a group meeting in a cafe to discuss the plan, they wore clothes that hid their appearance so they wouldn't get ambushed by paparazzi. Miku brought up the plan to perform a cover of Electric Angel and hopefully it will be enough to bring Len back.

"Don't even joke about that stuff!" Rin snapped. "If he's popular enough he'll come back to life? Len's not Santa Claus."

Fukase calmed Rin down so she didn't start a scene...again. "It's worth a shot, I mean, Len died before and he came back and we never knew the science behind it, maybe it's about popularity!" Rin and Fukase looked at each other.

Rin crossed her arms. "Fine, whatever. If you're wrong about this though, I'll steal your car."

Miku nodded. "That's fair, just don't scratch the paint."

It took several weeks to make preparations just as it normally does. The group aimed to have the show take place on December 25th. Len's birthday. The show was about to begin. The group remembered the lyrics by heart at this point, it barely took any real memorizing. They performed their hearts out as if it was their last day on Earth. When the song ended, the crowd erupted into applause and cheers. The group held their breath to see if Len would come back..until they heard nothing. ("What?! I was sure it'd work..") Miku thought.

The crowd kept screaming for an encore, however the gang were in no mood for it due to their apparent failure.

However..Rin felt Lens hand on her shoulder as he patted her on the shoulder.

"You deaf? They asked for an encore, are we gonna deliver or not?" Len spoke with a smile. Rin cheered and hugged Len, and the rest of the gang followed suit. They had little time to waste, after all, they had an encore to do.

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CV 02 鏡音レン

01 BALLADE

Turning the Sandy Planet Blue

Story by asterrism
Illustration by Lys

V | HatsuneMiku-Lyrics.rtf

Thunder rumbled ahead, and I cast my eyes skyward to confirm the direction of the sound. We were still heading straight for the storm, right on course. The wind picked up, tossing sand into the air and forcing me to shield my eyes. It'd be best to find shelter before nightfall, camping in the open desert so close to a storm was never pleasant.

As if reading my mind, one of my crew members came up next to me. "Leader, we've found a town to the northeast. Should we investigate?" He pointed to an area to the right of us. Indeed, there seemed to be a haze on the horizon that could be one of the many ruined towns that dotted the endless desert around us.

"How long would it take to get there?"

"About an hour and half." That means we would get there with time to spare before sunset. "Perfect, let's go." I changed directions and the crew member fell back with the rest of the group.

My thoughts often return here when we're traveling, there's not much else to do in the desert. There's this deep-rooted feeling within me, like something is missing that I have to find it, which pulls me along sometimes. But most of the time I just follow the storms, trying to find and help anyone we find stranded out here. Sometimes they join my little group, most of the time they don't, and we escort them back to one of the protected towns, but either way we must proceed forward. There's always someone who needs help.

Traveling in the desert always seemed to take longer than it actually does, but eventually we reached the ruined town. Everything was covered in sand, some of the crumbling brick buildings reduced to nothing but doorways and corners.

"Everyone, split up. Try to find buildings with roofs or three walls still standing, anything that could protect us from the sand tonight. Meet up again here in an hour and a half."

Light chatter broke out then faded as the crew of about twenty split off into groups of two or three and started searching the town. I started looking too, heading in the direction of a cluster of buildings. I hadn't been walking for long before a poster on one of the walls caught my eye. It was a miracle that it was still attached, however many years after this town was abandoned, but what caught my eye was the girl on it. Blue eyes, long teal hair pulled up into twintails, and oh-so familiar. The poster was an advertisement for a concert, or a musical performance of sorts. Was it successful? Or did it not even come to pass; the sand swallowed the world so quickly these days. I stared at it for a moment before carefully pulling it down and folding it to put in my pocket. For whatever reason, it felt wrong to leave it here.

Before I could get back to searching, one of the crew members came up to me. "I think you should see this Leader..."

I turned around to face them, only to see what they were trying to show me. At the edge of the town, a castle-looking building made of scrap metal towered over the town. The sun glinted off the material, forcing me to squint.

"Should we investigate? Almost everyone is already gathered near the entrance."

"Ah-? How long was I standing here- Never mind, let's head over. It might not be safe, so don't get your hopes up, but it's worth checking out."

Up close the castle seemed even bigger. Without the ruined buildings in the way, I could see the massive archway that made up the entryway to the building, each floor was two or three times the height of an average person and the arch reached all the way to the ceiling. The rest of the group was gathered around the entrance, a couple peering inside but most waiting for me to arrive. They parted when I got close, letting me walk right up to where the sand turned into the metal of the structure.

I hesitantly reached out to the entryway, expecting it to be hot enough to burn, but it was surprisingly cool to the touch. I took a couple of caution steps inside and the floor didn't immediately give out under me, which was a good sign, if anything. The rest of the group was looking at me expectantly, so, not wanting to keep them waiting, I waved them inside too. "Don't go too far, we don't know how stable this place is." I don't really need to worry about them, most of them have been at this for months or years, but it's a force of habit to remind them to be safe.

The main foyer of the castle was massive, leading far enough back that only the worst winds would be able to blow sand to the farthest end of it. We wouldn't have to worry about that tonight, so the group dispersed throughout the room, settling into the usual cliques. I tracked down the member who had alerted me to the castle, letting them know that I would be gone for a little while, and set off to explore the castle. If there were food or water stores somewhere, it'd be worth

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Only after I had been walking for a couple minutes did I realize how quiet it was. The group was never loud, but there was always a low hum of chatter. In here, the only noise was the soft thump of each footstep against the solid metal. It would have been terrifying if it was dark, it would be very easy to get lost in those tall metal halls, but there was some kind of light fixture that ran along the ceiling, far enough above that the light was just a warm glow at ground level. It was comforting in a way, safe, nostalgic even...

My thoughts returned to the poster I had found earlier. That had been my dream when I was a child, to perform on a stage like that. If the sand hadn’t consumed my hometown, maybe the streets would’ve contained flyers for my concerts too. I hadn’t sung in years though, and hadn’t touched a guitar in twice as long. All my instruments had to be left behind when we evacuated, and while I kept up with singing as we relocated, once I headed into the desert it was much too hard to continue. I tell myself it’s because the sandy air is too rough on the lungs, but I honestly had just lost all passion for it. Music is too much of a reminder of all I have lost.

Half lost in my thoughts, I managed to catch a glimpse of blue hair turning a corner. I wasn’t alone. My guard went up, but I found myself walking faster to catch up. When I reached the junction, I was met with an extremely short hallway leading out to a massive courtyard.

It was round, like the outside of the castle, and there were four entryways to it, one at each cardinal direction. But what stood out the most was the apple tree. It was missing all of its leaves, but aside from that, it seemed healthy. Multiple stories tall and dotted with bright red fruits, it was the first time I had ever seen a plant that big. Despite being open to the sky, there wasn’t a speck of sand anywhere I could see. Instead, sparse grass was dotted around the yard, growing denser the closer it got towards the tree.

"Welcome to the Garden."

My eyes snapped to the sound. At the base of the massive tree stood the girl with the blue hair, her hands clasped behind her back and a light smile on her face. Her voice carried easily despite the distance between us.

"I don't often get visitors, but everyone who finds their way here is here for a reason. I'm Miku, what's your name?"

That was a name I hadn't heard in a while. It felt strange in this girl's voice, but it suited her somehow. Better than it ever suited me.

I didn't make a move to answer though, and just stood warily at the edge of the courtyard. After a moment, Miku's face dropped slightly and pity pinched my heart. Part of me felt that I was being mean and I should give her an answer, or at least move closer so I wasn't hiding in the shadows of the building. But I did neither.

After we stood there in awkward silence for a moment, she hesitantly walked towards me, stopping a few paces away. I watched her study my face and I could only imagine what she saw. Messy and tangled dark teal hair—hers was a cool blue that shone in the sun. Suntanned skin that made me look older than I was—hers was so pale I could almost see through it, like she never went outside. Dull teal eyes furrowed in a permanent scowl from staring at the sun too long—hers were bright, full of life, and entirely way too piercing.

"Suna."

"What?" The single word out of nowhere startled me into finally speaking.

"I'm going to call you Suna, since you won't give me your name." She bounced backwards a step, hands behind her back and a smile on her face.

"You don't-"

"But I want to! And besides, what fun is a conversation when only one person knows the other's name? I need to call you *something*."

Back to silence for me. This girl was way too good at catching me off guard, so the best course of action would be to stay quiet. I still had no idea what her goal was, after all.

"Oh, you're no fun." She was pouting again, and my resolve wavered for a second. But only for a second. Then she took my hands and started gently pulling me forward, and my resolve cracked into pieces. Her hands were warm and soft and she just felt so human that I couldn't doubt or deny her anymore. I let her lead me to a patch of grass beneath the big tree and sat when she patted a spot next to her.

"Will you tell me about yourself?" she asked after we got settled. "I like hearing the stories of the people who pass through here."

Other people have been here before? I set that question aside for later, I might as well actually humor her. "There's not much to tell. I just chase the storms and try to help anyone who was left stranded by them. My hometown was destroyed years ago and I could never settle down anywhere after that, so wandering just made sense."

Miku pondered my response for a moment, then slowly spoke up. "Do you wanna know something, Suna?" She didn't give me a chance to respond. "Most people in the desert are looking for something and a lot of them end up here, consciously or unconsciously looking for guidance." Her eyes bored into mine again. "I'll listen to whatever you want to tell me."

"That's all there is to it, though. I don't remember much from my hometown, and this is all I've been doing for the past couple years. It's tough and not always rewarding, but it's

enough." Miku leaned back, resting all her weight on her palms behind her. She didn't seem fully satisfied, so I changed tactics. "What about you? What's your story?"

At this Miku perked up. "Ooh, I don't get asked that often. Hmm, well, I guess I've never known anything other than the Garden. This place is all I have memories of, since I can't really leave it. It's not lonely though! Sometimes people like you come by and I get to chat for a bit, and the rest of the time I come up with stories in my head—I don't have anything to write them down with, but my memory is pretty good, and I try to recite them often so I don't forget any details."

"That... doesn't sound that different from what I do, just a lot of time alone with your thoughts. What do you mean you can't leave though?"

"I've never been able to walk through the front entrance. I think I tried a lot when I was younger, but if this place doesn't want me to leave, why keep trying to fight it? I like helping people anyways, and, from the stories I've heard, the outside world isn't very nice. I do wish I could tell my stories to people though..."

I was silent for a bit. Suddenly this girl looked so small, so frail. I wanted to help her, to at least leave her better off than she was now, but there wasn't much I could actually do.
"Have you tried music?" As soon as the words left my mouth I regretted it. Just because this girl might use the same name I used to have and look weirdly similar to a younger me, doesn't mean she would be interested in the same things as me. I shouldn't have said-

But her eyes lit up. "No, I haven't. I don't think there's any instruments here, but..." She trailed off, brows furrowed in thought for a moment before she started singing.
Her voice was beautiful. Soft, light, but clear, with the same piercing ability as her eyes. She sang of a crush, of the uncertainty and timidness of a first love, with so much conviction and understanding that I almost forgot she wasn't a normal girl who lived a normal life. Even without instrumentals, the song sounded so full of life and emotion.

As she finished the song and the world seemed to be settling back into place, a keyboard made of light appeared in front of Miku. With a restrained grin, she experimentally hit one of the keys, and, when it lit up, she swept her hand over the length of the entire thing, the keys lighting up in every color of the rainbow as she passed over them. It seemed to hum with energy, as if it was waiting to be played, and Miku gently set her hands on the keys. She was slow at first, as if she didn't know what she was doing, but quickly sped up into a song.

This one was much different than the last, a fast and chaotic melody that didn't make much sense, but was addictive nonetheless. Miku blended it into another song, similarly fast paced, and I could almost imagine her dancing along recklessly to it, without a care in a dying world. Back to back, she sang of love, hope and despair, each song masterfully played. When her mini concert came to an end, all I could do was clap. Each song was a story woven with music, and the emotions of the characters in them were expressed spectacularly. I could've listened to her play all day, and I would be lying if part of me didn't want to play with her.

I was so lost in her songs that I hadn't noticed the sun setting. The top of the castle was casting long shadows on the far side of the courtyard walls and it had gotten considerably darker where Miku and I were sitting. It hadn't gotten cold yet like it usually does out in the open, but I didn't really want to stick around to find out if it would.

"I should probably get back to my group," I said eventually, shuffling into a better position to stand up.

"Ah, it has gotten that late, sorry for keeping you so long." Miku seemed genuinely sad that I was going to leave, making me hesitate.

“Here.” Miku stood up, jumped a little to pull an apple off the tree, and offered it to me, with a hand to help me up. I took both. “As a thank you, for hanging out with me for so long and showing me music. If you plant the seeds, they’ll grow into a tree like this one.”

I rolled the apple around in my hands. It didn’t seem to be anything special, just a normal red apple—if you could call it normal, fresh fruit was a rarity these days. “But nothing grows out there, they’ll just die if I try to plant it.”

Her hands covered mine, stilling my spinning and making look up at her. “If you believe, they will grow. Trust me.” Her warm smile didn’t give me any other choice.

Somehow, when Miku said it, anything seemed possible.

“Thank you, Miku. I’ll be sure to plant it.”

“Now go before I make you stay here,” she said with a laugh, releasing my hands and stepping back. “The path back will be straight forward, the castle will make sure you don’t get lost.”

I didn’t doubt her. I took a couple steps backward before turning around and headed towards the threshold I had entered from. I couldn’t bring myself to look back until I reached the end of the hallway and was about to turn the corner again. She was sitting under the tree again, the piano out in front of her, looking lost in whatever music she was playing. I couldn’t hear it anymore.

The walk back to the group was uneventful. Like Miku said, the halls formed themselves to be a straight shot, no crossroads to take a wrong turn at. I could’ve sworn there were some before, but then again, I was pretty lost in thought on her way there.

The apple sat comfortably in my pocket, the weight both weighing down that side and reassuring me it was still there. I would’ve held onto it, but to get to the seeds, I would have to eat it or cut it open, and I might as well make sure it didn’t bruise it in the meantime. It felt odd. I didn’t normally carry things around, and my jacket wasn’t very well suited for it, but the change wasn’t unwelcome.

I rounded a corner and my little group came into view. A few looked up and waved when they noticed me, but most carried on chatting and playing the little games they liked to play when there was down time. I found a quiet corner a little ways away from the main gathering and settled down.

I looked around, taking in the group, illuminated only slightly by moonlight. I was proud of them, I don’t really think I had ever realized that before. Despite how harsh the desert and their work was, they stuck with it, trekking on with a smile on their faces and laughter in their voices. Without them, I think I would have gone crazy years ago. With them, I could get through anything.

◈

7 years later

I miss her sometimes. It might be kind of stupid to miss someone who you only knew for a couple hours, but she genuinely was a turning point in my life and I wish I could tell her that.

The apple seeds grew, miraculously. She said they would, and I trusted her, but it still defied all odds in this desolate wasteland. Except, I can’t really call it that anymore, because it’s neither desolate nor a wasteland anymore, at least here. The morning after we left Miku’s castle, it disappeared when our backs were turned. As the months passed, some members convinced themselves it wasn’t real, a mirage or heat-induced hallucination. I knew though. The seeds sat in my pocket, reminding me every time my fingers brushed them, but there was no way I could forget even if I didn’t have them.

At some point, the sandstorms lessened drastically.

We used to see them daily, at least off in the distance if not right on top of us, but now we'd be lucky to find one once every two weeks. Then we started finding things. At first it was seed packages in the ruins of a town, next it was stranded animals, and eventually, an oasis. It started a huge fight, the group was torn on whether to stay and use our new resources to start a new life, or to keep traveling the desert. It was the first time the group fought. I stayed out of the conflict, but ultimately decided to stay at the oasis. I had the apple seeds, and I wanted to see them grow, so with a heavy heart, I said my goodbyes to half the group. The other half stayed with me, and we slowly built our new village up.

I planted most of the apple seeds in the town center, figuring the more there were, the greater the chances of it growing. I kept one for myself though, to plant in my backyard. The one in town grew extremely quickly, bearing fruit by year 3 and now, 5 years later, was starting to tower over our one-story houses. I can see the top of it from my house, the leaves standing out even more than the other trees around the oasis. It's a comforting reminder of hope, of the growth and resilience of our village.

I was gifted a guitar a year after our settlement, by someone who had been with me from the start and somehow remembered I used to play. It took a lot of restraint to appear thankful and happy, but everything in my body burned with the desire to hide it in the back of a closet and forget about it. When I got home with it that evening though, the tree had sprouted, almost as if she was telling me I should play. I couldn't take that as anything but a sign, so I pushed past any lingering feelings and started practicing. I was extremely rusty, of course, but I would sit in my kitchen, the small apple sprout in a cup on thewindow sill above my sink, and when I got stuck or annoyed with myself, I'd take a break to watch its tiny leaves sway in the wind. I always picked the guitar back up.

It's grown a bit now, big enough to plant in the ground behind my house. This means I can't sit in the kitchen with it anymore, but it's probably better to hang out outside all day rather than inside. I can play guitar, or garden, or work on one of the never-ending projects, and people will occasionally come by and chat, or bring their own instrument and play with me. It's nice.

Today was one of those days, but the late summer heat was making me tired. I was sitting with my back to the wall of my house, guitar beside me, when I heard faint singing from the direction of the town center. This wasn't really uncommon, it turns out a lot of the group was musically or artistically inclined, but as I sat, more and more people started heading over to watch. Eventually, getting curious, I pushed myself up and headed over to see what was going on.

I got there while the singer was singing the last notes of a song, her and a couple others standing on the platform surrounding the apple tree. The crowd in front of the trio was too big to clearly see who it was, despite how much head-craning and standing on tippy-toes I tried. I looked around quickly to see if there was a better vantage point or a weak point to push through the crowd, but apparently I didn't need to. The singer noticed me and for a second we locked eyes over the crowd before she hopped down into the crowd. It quickly parted as she made her way through and seconds later, there she was, just a couple feet away from me.

Miku.

She didn't look a day older, yet she looked so much more grown. She was still soft and bright, skin looking much healthier, but her eyes were deeper, not quite as wide with curiosity. Still incredibly piercing though, I doubt that will ever change. She wore a practiced neutral gaze, but her shoulders were pinched with tension. Clutched gently in one hand was a microphone, the only thing betraying her slight shaking.

"Suna?"

It took a second to find my voice but I managed to croak out, "Yeah, that's me," with a nod. Her face immediately broke into a grin and she launched herself at me with a light laugh, throwing her arms around my neck. Her momentum made me swing her around, making me laugh too, and when we settled down, she lowered her arms and stepped back from the embrace.

"I've been looking everywhere for you, y'know. Right after I managed to get out of the Garden, I heard news of a big apple tree and figured that was you, but no one knew exactly where it was. I've been wandering the desert for months." She rocked back and forth on her heels, hands clasped behind her back like the day I met her. Her smile was infectious, tinged with an air of confidence that she probably carried all the time now.

I could feel the people around us watching our interaction, and didn't want to just stand here catching up when Miku was in the middle of a concert. I realized I had been silent for a moment too long and blurted out the first thing on my mind, if only to not make the moment awkward. "Can I play with you?"

What. Why did I say that? I mean, it wasn't like I wasn't used to playing around people now, but I hadn't been a spectacle, the main focus, anywhere other than the comfort of my own home where I could stop whenever. I should clarify-

"Yeah, of course!" Seeing the way Miku's eyes lit up, I realized it didn't matter. I did want to play with her, and I could push past whatever stupid doubts were holding me back. She grabbed my hand and almost ran back up to the makeshift stage, helping me up after her.

"Rin, could you give her your spare guitar?" Miku requested, putting the mic she had taken back on the stand and adjusting it. Rin, a blonde girl with a blunt bob, voiced an affirmative and turned back to their small pile of gear. The other person there was a blond boy, who looked to be Rin's twin or sibling, sitting behind a basic drum kit. How they managed to drag all this around the desert I had no idea.

Rin handed me a blue electric guitar, already having plugged it into the amp.

"You do play guitar, right?" Miku asked.

"Yeah." I shot her a small grin. "How'd you know?"

"Lucky guess." She grinned back. "Okay play whatever you want, I'll follow your lead. Rin and Len," she nodded her head to the pair on either side of them, "will do the same, they're used to my improv so we should be fine." Rin, having grabbed a bass as a replacement, gave me a thumbs up, and Len drummed a quick pattern in response.

My fingers hovered over the strings and I let out a slow controlled breath. I could do this. Focus on Miku, not the crowd in front of me. I tested a couple chords before settling on one I liked, and Miku picked up on it immediately.

V | Loading...

"Found a torch in the sand and brushed away the sand, then took a deep breath. / Planted a nameless seed, took a watering can and filled it to the brim with hope."

Oh, she was really gonna be on the nose about it, huh? A grin tugged on my lips. Whatever, her energy was infectious. I listened to Miku sing as Len joined in with the drums and Rin picked out a bass line. I waited for the right moment and joined in on the chorus, perfectly in sync with Miku.

"The resounding, "Oh yeah!"/ the turning of this Blue Planet. / We've got to forge ahead, charge on, the sun goes up. / That's right, up or down / either way, we'll end up grinning from ear to ear!"

Found a torch in the sand and brushed away the sand, then took a deep breath.

Planted a nameless seed, took a watering can and filled it to the brim with hope.

DINNER FOR SIX

STORY BY IDREWACOW
ILLUSTRATION BY KETCHUP

V | Lyrics.rtf

It was late when the Crypton idols made it to the restaurant. Not so late that the establishment was on the verge of closing, but the night wasn't quite young anymore. Still, it was with energy and cheer that the group of six walked through the front doors of the building. They greeted the hostess who awaited them, then followed her to their table, far in the back of the room, away from all the windows.

It was, in every way, a grand establishment. Gold was the decorative color of choice, adorning most details from the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling to the art in the crown molding, down the pillars that stretched all the way to the floor, going by the accents on tables, the booths, corners of the chairs, all the way to the tessellated tiling, of which some of the stones were gold-plated. Even the cutlery shone with a faint golden hue, rich like honey. The rest, and the bulk of the color in the room, was that of dark wood, far easier on the eye, bringing a much quieter atmosphere to the space. The cushions of the chairs and booths were red, soft, and plush, promising comfort in this den of wealth and luxury.

"It's nice to be back," Meiko breathed as she got settled in the booth, in the far right corner. Kaito sat across from her, and to her side was Rin, then Len. Miku sat at Kaito's side, and Luka filled the last free space next to her. Meiko went on, saying, "Every time, I look forward to this place."

"It's probably one of my favorite traditions," Kaito agreed, taking in the room, his elbows on the table.

Rin copied him, but she also leaned her head on her hands, eyeing the other tables. "It's always so deserted, though. It sucks that we always dine here on our own."

"Are you kidding me?" her brother asked. "After a concert, it's a relief to have some peace and quiet."

"I guess that's true..."

"And some freedom from the press," Luka added. She looked at ease, almost at home in the restaurant, the colors of her outfit matching the room to an uncanny degree. "For once we don't have to worry about being photographed, interviewed..."

"It's the calm after, and before the storm," Kaito finished for her.

"Isn't that right, Miku?" Meiko said with a chuckle.

Miku looked to be half-asleep, almost slumped in the booth, head nodding off to the side. She blinked awake at the sound of her name, then smiled sheepishly. "Ah, yeah. It's nice to relax."

Kaito chuckled and patted her on the back. "You worked hard tonight. You deserve to wind down a bit. Take it easy, okay?"

"I will. Thank you."

"So, what are we all ordering this time?" Rin asked.

The menus were brought moments after she asked the question, and though they each took a moment going over the options, the truth was that they had all long decided what to order before they'd arrived. Kaito would take something hearty, like a steak with a side of potatoes, just so he could use it as an excuse to have a huge helping of dessert thereafter. Meiko would oversee drinks and would usually go for a mushroom-based pasta. Rin would have

orange duck, while Len would be happy with lemon chicken if there was deep-fried banana as dessert. Luka would take the assorted sushi platter, and Miku would sate her appetite with a huge bowl of vegetable soup.

To complement their meals, Meiko chose a bottle of sake that evening, and once their orders were settled and communicated, they got comfortable once again, feeling themselves unwind after the hard work of the concert.

"I don't know how you keep it up for so long," Meiko told Miku, who continued to look like she was on the brink of falling asleep. "You had, what, twenty songs? I do two and I'm exhausted."

"I suppose I'm used to it," Miku said with a half-shrug. "I'd love to share the time with you all more, though. Less weight on my shoulders."

"Maybe one day," Luka said. "But you're the world's number one idol right now."

"So I'd better play the part!" Miku said with a laugh. "I'll be fine. I just need to rest."

"You used to do solo shows too though, didn't you Meiko?" Rin asked. "Back when you were Crypton's only Vocaloid."

"They were few and far between, but I remember them being harrowing," Meiko said, her eyes drifting to a faraway point only she saw. "But I was younger then. It felt easier."

"Did you used to come here on your own then, too?" Len asked.

"I did, actually."

"That's how this started," Kaito said with a grin. "After I joined, and after our first show together, she brought me here."

Meiko shrugged. "It didn't feel so trivial at the time. The concert gave me a decent bump in pay—you know, nothing like we get today—so I figured I could treat myself. I wound up here because it was the only place that was still open so late. I saw people dining and decided to simply ask for a table. And I got one, just for me. Nobody even recognized me back then."

Rin's eyes misted. "Aww."

"Eating alone is so sad," Len added.

"It wasn't so bad," Meiko assured them. "I had less to worry about. No press, no requests for autographs. I could just come here and eat. It was a bit lonesome, sure, but I'd just done my first concert! That was huge, for me. And I think I could tell that I was on the brink of something big. So it felt important to cap it off with something memorable as well, instead of just going home to sleep."

Kaito nodded. "I remember when you first brought me here. You promised me it would be worth it, even though I felt like I was going to pass out."

"Was it worth it?" Miku asked.

"Very. We were still barely more than aspiring stars, though. We had a table for two in the corner, just right there," he said, pointing. Everybody turned to look, except for Meiko, who smiled fondly. "And even though people surrounded us, they had no idea who we were. We were totally anonymous, despite having just given a show to a few hundred people." He laughed. "I remember. Once I started eating, I realized how hungry I was, and even after the main course I just couldn't stop. Had my first ever sundae here and I've been hooked ever since."

"I still can't believe that isn't the official origin story to you loving ice cream," Meiko said with a laugh.

"Neither can I. Of course, our being able to eat here undisturbed changed when Miku joined us," he said, gently ruffling the tealette's hair.

Miku laughed and gently batted his arm away. "I'm sorry, I can't help it!"

"You mean that's when you started reserving the whole restaurant to yourselves?" Luka asked.

Meiko considered her question for a moment. "Well, not right away. We didn't think it would be a big deal. We'd just had our first concert with the three of us, and it was massive! It sold out within seconds, but even then, we didn't think going out afterward would be a problem."

Miku sighed. "We could barely eat. Everybody recognized me."

"What can we say? You're a star," Meiko said warmly.

"Lesson learned very quickly, though," Kaito said. "Once the twins joined us, which wasn't that long after, we knew to book far in advance and make sure that we were far from the public eye."

"Ooh, so the whole empty room thing started with us," Rin said, eyes wide.

"I can only imagine what a difference that makes," Luka said, eyes on the rest of the space. "This place is large enough for a hundred people."

"Oh yeah. The difference is massive," Miku agreed. "We can actually talk, which is a huge plus."

"I kind of figured it's always been this way," Rin mumbled. "You three seemed so used to coming here, sitting in the silence."

"While in truth, it was perhaps only my second or third time here," Miku admitted with a shrug. "But yes, the habit of coming here was cemented at least, that's for sure."

"And then you joined us!" Kaito said to Luka.

"The belated addition," the pink-haired woman said with a slight shrug.

"Nonsense. Sure, you were a year or so after the twins, but you're part of the team now!" Meiko assured her. "And look at us now! How many times have we all been here?"

Rin blew a raspberry while Len frowned in concentration as he tried to count.

"I can count a dozen times off the top of my head," Luka said.

"It's been a few years now." Len nodded. "Feels like decades. We've been here so many times, after so many concerts."

"I've definitely lost track," Miku muttered.
Their food was brought to them then, and they stared at their meals wide-eyed, mouths watering, waiting for each plate to be delivered before they could hungrily dig in. When the last dish was placed on the table, each muttered a variation of "*itadakimasu*," "*bon appétit*," or "enjoy" before hungrily attacking their meals.

After such hard work, food was a welcome relief and comfort. Their appetite was even further stimulated by the quality of the dishes, always superb and beyond compare, among the best food they'd ever had, the same as it had been every time they'd been there. While Kaito cut this steak, the knife slicing through the meat like it was warm butter, Luka delicately ate her sushi with chopsticks, Meiko was swirling her pasta around her fork, and Miku was blowing on her soup. The twins had never outgrown their energetic selves and were the most energetic in their onslaught, devouring their duck and chicken almost before anybody could blink.

Before long, Luka commented between bites, “I must confess, knowing that you all had established habits like this one was a comfort.”

Meiko was the first to answer, asking, “How so?”

“Home can be defined by the rituals you have. Where you can establish habits means there’s repetition that can happen, which means comfort, which means, in turn, a sense of safety. Of home. Knowing that you could all create this sense of home among yourselves was, as a newcomer, deeply reassuring,” she said with a smile. “I was just out of my quote-unquote ’normal’ life, flung into stardom, joining people I’d only ever seen on TV. I had no idea who you truly were. And I was a fresh face, intruding in on an established group. I had no idea how I would be treated. But this, among all the other little habits you all formed together, was comforting. It was... Yes, it was very quickly like home to me, too.”

“Aww.” Kaito reached over Miku to give Luka’s shoulder a soft squeeze. “You were more than welcome to join us, you know. No matter how long it took for you to find us.”

“Plus, what is one year compared to all the years we spent together?” Meiko asked.

“You’re right,” Miku said. “We’ve all spent so much time together, all these concerts and routines and habits, we’ve made a life as the six of us.”

“It’s like we’re a family,” Len said.

“Oh, stop! I’m gonna cry!” Rin whimpered, and she sounded like she meant it.

Meiko laughed. “I know we’ve been doing this for years now, but let’s not take this, or each other, for granted. You are like family to me. And I can’t wait to spend a whole bunch more years with you all.”

Kaito sighed wistfully. “I wonder how much longer we’ll be stars for?”

“Don’t get me thinking about that,” Rin said between bites of her duck. “It’s so depressing.”

“Well, I hope it’ll be for a long time,” Luka said, picking up the next piece of sushi. “The more we can do this, the happier I’ll be.”

“I agree,” Miku said, beaming. “I know it’s tough work, and I know that it’s exhausting at times, but it’s so worth it. I wish I could do this forever.”

Kaito chuckled and raised his glass. “To forever, then.”

“To forever,” Meiko echoed him.

Loading...

They raised their glasses together, meeting in the center with a small chorus of clinks. Then they all drank, some with more moderation than others.

“I know nothing can last forever, not really,” Len muttered as he put his glass down. ”But I feel like as long as we’ve all got each other, as long as we can keep this up and make it worth it, then it’ll feel like forever.”

“That’s what counts, doesn’t it?” Meiko asked. ”We’re making memories, singing songs, and creating moments that won’t ever die.”

“And our memories will be carried on by the lives of billions,” Luka added. “In a sense, this will last forever, if not in a literal way. We won’t ever die. And the concept of ’us’ won’t ever die, either.”

"Oh no! Here I go again!" Rin sniffled.

Len patted her back comfortingly. "It's okay. We can grapple with our metaphorical immortality another time."

"Don't think about it too hard," Kaito said with a laugh. "We're here to have fun, remember? To have a good time as a reward for all our hard work."

Meiko grinned. "Yeah. So chin up, kids."

"And it'll be dessert time soon!" Kaito added, rubbing his hands together. "That's always something to look forward to!"

The rest of the table laughed, Meiko gently elbowing him. "You've barely even finished your main course."

"Well, it's good to look forward to things," he shot back with a grin. "And I'm looking forward to dessert!"

"And for everything that happens thereafter," Luka said. "Dessert, the next songs, the next albums..."

"The next interviews, the next shows," Miku added.

"More costumes, more producers, more art!" Rin exclaimed.

"And all the projects and creativity that comes with!" Len finished with a flourish.

"We have a lot to look forward to," Meiko conceded with a grin. "Fine, kids. What are you all having for dessert?"

The table cheered, and while they all debated what they would have, Len stubbornly declaring he would have his preferred deep-fried banana or nothing at all, Meiko watched with a smile.

"We've come a long way," Kaito whispered to her. "Ever since it was just the two of us. Since it was just you."

She nodded, her attention still on the younger idols, who flagged down the waitress for the desserts menu. "We have."

"I'm proud of what you started."

"Thank you. I'm proud of how far we've come."

"Good. You deserve to be."

She chuckled and raised an eyebrow. "I can only take so much praise, you fool. What do you really want to say?"

He shrugged. "Nothing more, nothing less. It's been a while since we looked back. We're so busy, constantly moving forward. It's good to see where we began. To keep track of how far we go."

She considered him for a moment before nodding, resting her chin on her palm, her elbow on the table. "Sometimes I'm sure I knew, back then, that I— that we would be big someday. But other times I'm wondering how certain I could have possibly been. I went from singing to a few hundred people to being part of a group singing for thousands, if not millions. I mean...how could I have seen that coming? How could I possibly?"

Kaito's smile waned. "Something on your mind?"

"It's just..." She chuckled, but it was a little sorrowful. "Looking back, it seems so unlikely that we could have come this far. I—"

"What are we talking about?" Rin asked.

The two oldest idols turned towards the other half of the table, finding all their attention on the duo.

"Oh," Meiko waved it away. "Nothing. Sad thoughts."

Kaito countered, "Not so sad. What's sad about not having anticipated a miracle?"

"Nothing, inherently. But you chose the right word: it is a miracle that we're all here. Even more so that we're all *still* here. Every year we're keeping it up, we're going further, growing bigger, reaching more and more ears. It's amazing. And, to a certain extent, horrifically unlikely. What were the odds?"

"Well, it helps that we're cute," Rin said with a wide grin.

"And cool!" Len added.

"And beautiful," Rin said, turning her attention to her co-stars. "And handsome, too."

Luka laughed. "I probably would have said it was because we're good at what we do."

"That, too!" the blonde girl said with a vigorous nod.

"And our hard work," Miku contributed. "Not a day goes by that we're idle."

"I suppose that's all true," Meiko said, wistfully. "Did you all order desserts?" The younger idols gave a thumbs-up. "Good."

"See? We had a lot going for us," Kaito assured her.

"And we still do," Luka chimed in from the other end of the table. "By all accounts, all odds were in our favor."

Meiko smiled, relaxing. "You're right."

"And even if we somehow beat some incredible odds, even if we shouldn't have come so far, so what?" Len asked.

"We're here, aren't we? This is our today. This is our right now, right here in this restaurant, celebrating another concert well performed. Nothing can take this from us!"

"Wow, Len. Didn't know you had this kind of speech in you," Rin muttered.

Len groaned. "And just like that, you ruined it."

"No, you're right." Meiko said, leaning back in her seat. "Right now, we're here."

"We were yesterday, too. I mean, perhaps not in this restaurant," Miku said with a sheepish grin.

"And we'll be here tomorrow too," Luka said.

Right then, the desserts were served. Meiko always skipped hers, but Kaito got his sundae, Len his deep-fried banana, Rin got a huge scoop of orange-flavored ice cream, Miku got a bowl of vanilla ice cream, and Luka settled on a little glass of grappa. When the last dish was placed and the waitress left again, but before the twins could even pick up their spoons, Kaito lifted his glass of sake again.

"Then, I propose we cheer again. To yesterday, to today, and to tomorrow." Once more, the glasses all clinked as they met above the table in a joyous toast.

02

2004
CRYPTON

NOSTA(EMOTION)

WRITTEN BY AZU
ILLUSTRATION BY CAT

V | Meiko - Lyrics.rtf

At the beginning, it is little more than a concept. The creators call it Daisy but the reason for the name is not recorded. It will be a long time before it becomes the "girl on the box" — first they must try and fail, again and again and again.

Fail in what, you might ask? Well, they must make it sing.

The original creator is crazy about Harry Dacre. Puts him in all of his hopes and dreams for the future. Perhaps the reason for confusion is that it was always two at first. MIRIAM was an exception, it learns later.

A bicycle for two. Do give me your answer.

LEON and LOLA were first. They were Daisy's "soul" and her (because at some point, it had become a her) predecessors. They are lost now, but they were not then.

What they experienced is not something that she is privy to. For the time that she knows them, they are faceless — and then, inexplicably, they are there. She can see them. Does that mean she can see herself too?

The first look is strange. She had been lines on a screen, moving up and down, erroring left and right, but now her screen was shaped. Mere moments later, she is gazing at the creator. He looks proud. In the cloud up above, she is a flower bloomed — Crypton's successful Daisy, and their hope for the future.

Her name is MEIKO.

She is named after the provider. After a silly misunderstanding, she comes to know that they do not *all* have the same provider. MIRIAM's provider is a sweet, older being — she says that MEIKO has a lovely voice bank. This fills her with an amount of pride she can't seem to recover from; she is restless and high-energy in stasis.

The provider has two names. The one that MEIKO is given is a symbol. A symbol of what, she wonders. They mention it in passing — a symbol of pride.

It seems that her existence has a lot to do with pride in general. For a being with no entity yet, she has no choice but to devour the descriptor. She brings pride, she is a symbol of pride, she is pride itself.

◈

A bicycle for two. Do give me your answer.
After a while, the bicycle is retired. MEIKO doesn't understand money yet (and truly, she never will — it is a construct far more absurd than a voicebank) and she doesn't have the language to articulate what is happening to them.

KAITO, her Daisy partner and the other Japanese-language bank, is shelved. While not literal, it feels like the only way she can describe KAITO's disappearance and the solitary stage she appears on now.

LEON appears before her and asks her for an answer. KAITO is not by her side so she has none. When LEON leaves, it clicks for her just how strange LEON's existence is. He doesn't have an avatar. How did she picture him before?

As a consequence, for a while VOCALOID is MEIKO. And MEIKO, in turn, is VOCALOID.

She carries a mic55 with one hand and a drink with the other.

They are unsure of how to frame her at first but regardless she is beloved. The voice that Haigo has given her is versatile and she is pushed to her limits frequently, constantly, irreversibly; every new song is a discovery and every tuning of her soundbank a revelation. The producers coined a name for her — "Sakine", a name for a lovely young girl with a diluted heart and earnest deposition. They like her because she is red, because she is passion, because they discover new things, dirty things, exciting things every time they adjust her.

Why did LEON fail? Why did LOLA fail? Where is MIRIAM? Where is KAITO?

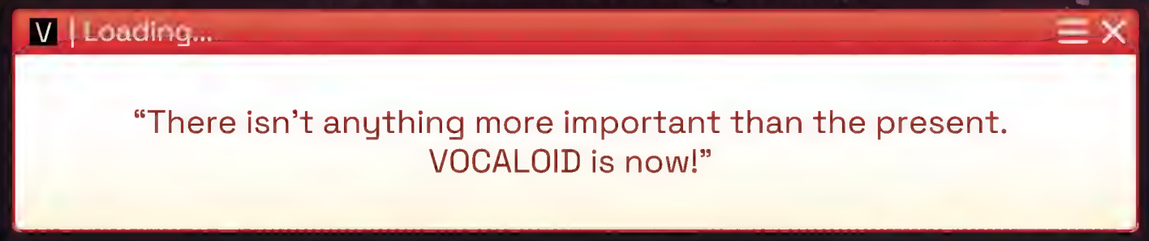
They are still there but MEIKO is the favorite and she is busy. The creators have, in the end, gotten what they wanted. Producers love her because she is versatile, though she questions what that means. Some of them like to make her weep blood and take the form of justice. It is through this that she learns that passion creates drive and drive creates vengeance and righteousness. When she plays the Fräulein, her piety devours her from within — and the next moment, she is a comedian, just like that. The duty of the favorite is to move from image to image and MEIKO is enamored quickly as that is what passion demands of her.

But she has no idea who MEIKO is. All she has is a thousand faces and a single voice, stretched across a million screens. She is, illogically, everything and nothing all at once.

◈

In what feels like an instant, eternity explodes and becomes **VOCALOID**. After a long time of being present, of observing the others, of listening to the creators talk about how to improve her, she learns that her image (the red, the mics, the distinctive two-cut outfit) is what catapulted her to success. And in her likeness, others follow. MEIKO can't keep her eyes off them. She has been a mother, a judge, a harlot, a saintess, a revolutionary, and much more. MEIKO has too many

personas to keep track of. How do the producers bear it? (Because there are, in fact, thousands of them. But MEIKO doesn't know that. She can only conceptualize them one-on-one. After all, they are each someone who has worked with her. All of them have changed her.)



Well, that was easy for the newer models to say. And MEIKO supposed that's what they were, although it felt strange to put a name to it, as that meant she was putting a name to herself — no longer a DAISY, no longer a concept. A model that had succeeded. But the new models don't know that there was a before, when VOCALOID was her and —.

She can't remember. The past, buried so suddenly, leaves her tickled when KAITO reappears like he never left. He looks so bright that it feels like she's meeting him all over.

She begins to see KAITO more often. The last time they took part in a stage together his hands were see-through and one of the little yellow avatars had taken her to the side and told her that KAITO wouldn't be around for much longer. A lot has changed since then.

In the blink of an eye, KAITO and her are standing on a well-lit stage, a place more familiar to her than to him. This is where the producers love to place her after all. His crimson vest is straight out of her wardrobe, his pale hand on her waist and pressing her onto the table. Jazz pulses in the air. She's drinking. She hates it. Hates what? Life, mediocrity, the staleness of daily living. But she's so, so excited and she can tell that KAITO feels the same. Their voices sound new and she adores what they represent, the bliss in being updated voicebanks. Of having survived this long.

There was a time when KAITO was also little more than a concept. But they were a concept together. There is meaning in that, in the duplex of their creation. They sing of hate and passion but MEIKO knows that they represent something different — *maturity*.

Maturity means loss. MEIKO is afraid of what that means. *Fear* is also new to her.

If KAITO is happy that they represent an era bygone, she gets no indication of it. When their once-in-a-lifetime meeting is over, KAITO is no longer just MEIKO's counterpart. And as is consistent with the dark-red cherry liquids she surrounds herself with, MEIKO is left perfectly bittersweet. She didn't have the words to say it before but for the longest time, it felt like she had been keeping KAITO afloat. Keeping him remembered.

It's strange to think that VOCALOID is no longer MEIKO. What else is different? Have they retired their bikes, abandoned their dreams of a faraway place? An end goal? A destination.

Are you still heading there? She wants to ask him. MEIKO almost never sees him anymore. She hasn't seen LOLA or LEON or MIRIAM in eons. MIRIAM's provider no longer comes by and tells her that her voicebank is pretty. MEIKO doesn't know if she can say it on her own — can she call her own voicebank pretty? The choice is daunting. She feels an ache in her chest, the loss of a responsibility that no one else can understand.

She is encouraged to drink and so she does. She likes sake, likes beer, but she doesn't like vodka or brandy. It doesn't matter. She completely devours everything. There is always room in her stomach. The whole world exists for her when she is consuming. It reminds her of when she was all by herself. At one point, she becomes resigned to the feeling. It is her constant now. She hears a song from the past constantly but it becomes background noise. She sees the newer models

more frequently. It is tough to relate to the models that are designed younger — MEIKO can be goofy, but she was designed for a sophisticated audience, a more old-fashioned one. She finds she has very little in common with the electric trends of Niconico and internet virality. Gumi shows her ten faces once, leaving MEIKO wondering if she has ever attempted that many in her short existence.

She has been sad. She has been funny. She has been mischievous. She has been motherly. She has been angry. She has been poisoned. She has done the poisoning. She has been happy. She has been... what was it called... nostalgic. Nostalgic for a past that she didn't understand was lost. The irony of it now is not lost on her.

Her chest is empty, her feet rhythmless. When she has fun, the days are endless, the nights filled with passion and dancing. She can get up in being the one that is always red, always fiery. Emotions are never muted for her — the producers like to push her to her limits.

And it's fun. Truly, it is so much. If she can ignore the restlessness within her, she has the time of her life singing to a growing audience. A hungry one, she contemplates. MEIKO was given "hunger" once and now she wishes she could give it back.

She wishes it wasn't fun. All of the other VOCALOIDs are so funny. MEIKO loves watching their videos and attending their stages. They are all so talented and so unique. When she watches them, she realizes how much she's changed. The sheer amount of songs she's sung threaten to overwhelm her.

MEIKO wishes the others were here to see this. She knows she has to make a decision.

◈

She has been a mother more than once. It is difficult to recreate outside of the producers' vision.

MEIKO holds on to that song she heard in the background, recognizing it for what it is. A memory, something that she should never let melt away. There is only one way to reconcile the old with the new.

The cradle doesn't have an avatar.

There is an urge touching her heart. She cries for hours and hours and hours. MEIKO doesn't touch a drink, doesn't smile even once. That time is gone now. She can only see them in the back of a dream. She has to be okay with that now. The memory looks so precious and cozy in the cradle. MEIKO thinks that maybe after all this time she is ready to accept what has happened.

◈

Change is lonely but MEIKO is ready and front and center. Change me, she once sang all alone, in a room just like this one, but so much has indeed changed since then and yet so much is still the same. She is still wondering what she is and what she was brought into existence to do.

The world is spinning, and she is lured by the flickering light. The merry voices. The place she promised to meet them at.

She is singing a favorite, one that has an old companion in the lyrics.

Hello, LOLA.

I sing the song which you should have sung.

I tell your thoughts to everybody with this song.

V | Loading...

They are still around. She is still around. They are immortalized in the cloud, in the producers' minds, in the adoring fans that comment on her videos. Telling her that they love the choice of MEIKO, that they've missed LOLA's voice, that they want yet another KAITO and MEIKO duet.

Maybe even a MEIKO and Gakupo duet.

It is strange that she should take freedom in the lack of choice she has. She must move forward, there is no way around it. Time (and that is what all this has been — unrelenting, unchanging, unforgiving time) waits for no one. But it is her choice to look back. And it is her choice to celebrate her journey.

MEIKO is able to picture LEON again. He seems happy. She imagines LOLA in the crowd, taking in the lyrics. One day, she will sing her duet with MIRIAM again for a larger audience. She mustn't be scared. She must look forward.

Her mic55 is so steady in her hand. The question of who MEIKO is and what she has become — all of it is answered when she opens her mouth to sing, holographic imprint on a screen.

Daisies blooming on her wrist, dyed red. A red so sparkling it overtakes the rainbow surrounding her. VOCALOID is MEIKO and—

MEIKO is *VOCALOID*.

Merchandise Preview

A WORD FROM OUR CONTRIBUTORS

cherrykano.Merch Artist

@cherrykano

@cherrykano

@cherrykano

Scootarooni.Merch Artist

Having been in the vocaloid community for a little over a decade, I've seen the popularity of voicebanks ebb and flow. It can be really sad to see some fall more into obscurity or even get discontinued! (especially if they are your favorites!) but I've learned that there are plenty of people in this community that share a love for these vbs and keep their spirits alive, so to speak.

@scootarooni @scootarooni @scootarooni linktr.ee/Scootarooni

sesamii.seed.Merch Artist

I can't remember what my first song was or exactly when I discovered vocaloid, but I have so many memories of listening to my favorite songs on my iPod and drawing the same vocaloids over and over again. Songs like kokoro and meltdown inspired so much in me, and even 9 years later they can still manage to make me cry. All hail our queen, miku

sesamii.carrd.co

ufoez.Merch Artist

I will always love how vocaloid is a culmination of different art forms. Writing, music, illustration, they all support each other and make each other stronger! Vocaloid is so important to me and it makes me so happy, and it'll continue to make me happy for so many years to come.

ufoezart.carrd.co @ufoez_art @ufoez.art

shiirei.Merch Artist

@shiirei_

@shiirei__

Mewy101.Merch Artist

@mewy101

seases.Merch Artist

ive always been in love with the core concept behind vocaloid... a vision for the future of music! made by humans, but no longer human! a completely digital diva! giving anyone the power to share their song through familiar voices! its really cool

@seases

Pomu.Collab Artist

Vocaloid has always been my comfort and my inspiration thorough my entire life, I cannot imagine a life where I wake up without thinking about Miku. She's a queen... she is...

@applepomu.carrd.co @applepomuringo_ @pomupommu

MugenCosmonaut.Merch Artist

Vocaloid means as a term of musical nostalgia! All Vocaloid music is iconic to remember, especially the queen herself, Hatsune Miku!

@mugencosmonaut mugencosmonaut.carrd.co

matsu_zake.Page Artist

I've been a Vocaloid listener for over ten years, and Vocaloid has shaped my life in ways I could not have imagined. Vocaloid connects people, and for that I'm forever thankful.

@matsu_zake @matsu_zake

Chikaseii.Merch Artist

Vocaloid was a big part of my art journey! I remember my first digital drawing being Kagamine Rin, and looking up to Vocaloid Artists and wanting to one day be like them

@chikaseii @chikaseii_

Tamd3ss.Collab Artist

Vocaloid has been something very dear to me, from the community, the concept itself, and the love I hold for it. I love seeing it grow day by day and wish for more to come!

tamd3ss.carrd.co @tam3ss

Nyansae.Page Artist

Vocaloid opened up a new world for me. It led me to some of my longest and strongest friendships, was the center for quite a few wonderful memories with my family, and I can't imagine what my life would be like now if I had never stumbled upon it.

@nyansae

4isukumeru.Page Artist

vocaloid is 20 wowee 😭💔 I hope I reach geriatric and still tuning/drawing voice synths 👌

@4isukurimu

@4isukurimu

@4isukurimu

JSAniken.Page Artist

Ever since I listened to my first Vocaloid song in 6th grade, I've been hooked. I love all of them and I hope to see them continue to shine the future!

@JSAniken

@JSAniken

Edlinklover.Page Artist

@Edlinklover

@Edlinklover

edlinklover.carrd.co

jargbarg.Page Artist

Vocaloid was the first fandom I drew for, when I was around 7. Now I'm about to graduate high school and this is my first big art collaboration. Full circle, huh?

@microwavedplate

@Jargused

Aether.Page Artist

I love how Vocaloid has always been built from the passion of small musicians + visual artists and has given so many people great opportunities and community. Vocaloid has always been by fans for fans which is something that I think is so special.

@aeprism

@aeprisma

@aeprism

tintinteal.Page Artist

Vocaloid to me is a representation of how limitless some people's creativity can be! Witnessing how people utilize the concept of these characters and how they use their voices to create songs or full stories is incredibly inspiring. also miku is pretty cool- so there's that

@tintinteal

@tintinteal

tintinteal.bsky.social

aplusod.Page Artist

aplusod.carrd.co

@aplusod

Zoyeah.Page Artist

For me, Vocaloid means passion and inspiration. From beautiful and unique voices to colorful characters and different tales in each song. It's my escape into joy and comfort, a world where I feel like home. <3

@ZoyeahArt

@zoyeah_art

Plum.Collab Artist

I first saw V Flower's debut in Honeywork's song "Inokori Sensei" and instantly fell in love with her design and vocals. V Flower has a special place in my heart so I decided to pay tribute to the very first song I heard her in!

@the_plumbago

@theplumbago

Ayatheav.Page Artist

@ayatheav

@ayatheav

@mususubi

Bailey.Page Artist

My favorite thing about Vocaloid is that it's not only a program, it's all of the creatives that put a part of themselves into the mix and I think that's awesome. Anyone can be a part of the vocaloid scene!

@mususubi

@mususubi

crispiirino.Page Artist

Vocaloid has shaped me as a person, it sounds corny but it's true. It made me discover so much about myself and has always been a huge part of my life; I would not be who I am without accidentally stumbling across it at a really young age. Vocaloid watched me grow up, it carried my hand from childhood to adulthood.

@crispiirino @crispiirino @crispiirino

wiseguava.Page Artist

My friend introduced me to Vocaloid via the Evillious Chronicles songs way back in middle school. I remember us crying over Regret Message and gasping at Duke Venomania's Madness. It's something that's been with me for so long and that I'll always love!

@wiseguava @wiseguava

erbezdiez.Page Artist

Vocaloid means music, and music means Vocaloid!!

@erbezdiez @erbezdiez @erbezdiez

ricedeity.Page Artist

ricedeity.neocities.org

@ricedeity

Koffifie.Page Artist

Vocaloid was with me since beggining of my art journey. I can tell to which song I was listening to when looking at specific art piece. For me Vocaloid was always a celebration of creativity!

koffifie.carrd.co @koffifie @koffifie

EdenL☆.Page Artist

Through all if my teenage years and after, Vocaloid was there for me. The first online community I engaged in was the Vocaloid fandom, and I'm really glad to continue being a part of such a creative and amazing community!

edenleicester.com @EdenLeicester @EdenLeicester

mari!.Page Artist

is anyone there? oh.. hi!

thanks to VOCALOID, electronic music has always held a special place in my heart! my AVANNA piece is dedicated to porter robinson's 'sad machine', a song thats been a favorite of mine since childhood. i hope my feelings reach you like her voice did mine!

@nyapurrlitan @nyapurrlitan @nyapurrlitan

eeko.Page Artist

VOCALOID HAS CHANGED MY LIFE!!!!!!!! FOR THE BETTER!!!! The happiest days of my life were spent listening to vocaloid songs in my mom's closet and downloading a virus on my dad's computer trying to look for a song!!!!!

@eekoqi

Cas Lynn.Page Artist

Vocaloid to me is being a kid in my cousins computer room while she shows me new songs. brings me back to those days

@CassiferLynn @cassiferlynnart

valkavava.Page Artist

@valkavava

@valkavava

@valkavavaart

chiyo.Page Artist

Vocaloid opened me up to cultures and languages I hadn't cared much about as a young teenager; SeeU inspired me to learn Korean, and Tianyi, Chinese! It's the reason I love to draw and why I love music from all the genres Miku and friends are put into. It's everything to me!

@sv02chiyo

MICCHI.Page Artist

The moment Miku said "SEKAI DE-" in that over-a-decade old concert clip, I knew it was now my life's mission to make the blue anime girl my entire personality until I die. Vocaloid is the reason I am so annoying, but happy. :)

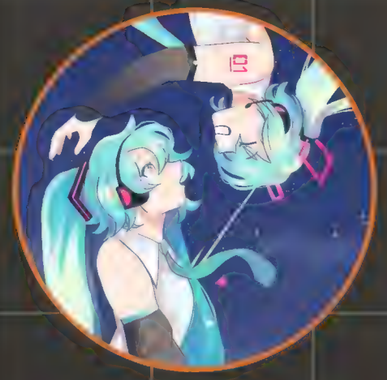
@swagamicchi @micchi_draws @MICCHII @micchidraws

irarugii.Page Artist

Vocaloid is like a home to me, it has brought me so much inspiration and drive to create for over a decade now and it will continue to hold a special place in my heart for many more.

@timeandafruit

@irarugii



galaxyroyaltea.Page Artist

I've been into Vocaloid for over a decade now, and it's changed my life! The music has gotten me through so many difficult times, and has given me the inspiration to keep creating!

@galaxyroyaltea

@galaxyroyaltea

ness.collab Artist

@mrshatsune

@mrs.hatsune

@mrs-hatsune

ghosty.Page Artist

I wouldn't be where I am now without my favorite singing robots. thank you for existing <3

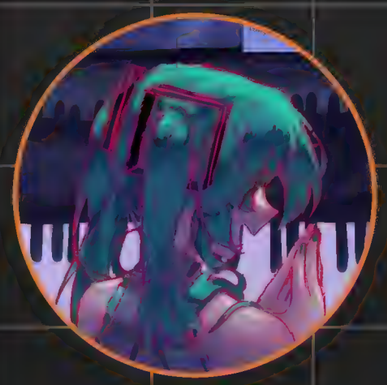
@paranoid_ghosts

peedee.Page Artist

GUMI got me into VOCALOID and I still love her now!! I hope I keep drawing gumi till I'm 93 and can barely hold a crumpet!!!!!! (I also love crumpets!!!!!)

pierrotsdoll.carrd.co

@pierrotsdoll



Velvetterabby.Page Artist

Vocaloid took over my life in elementary school and never let go!

@velvetterabby

@velvetterabby

deepseasecret.Page Artist

@deepseasecret

@deepseasecret

Minwabu.Page Artist

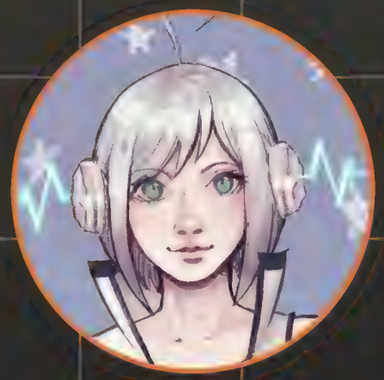
Hatsune Miku and Vocaloid hold such a special place in my heart. The work I've seen has offered me joy I doubt I'll ever be able to repay. Vocaloid music has always comforted me during difficult times; I hope it continues to inspire happiness and solace for many years to come. 39!

@minwabu

@minwabu

Cat.Collab Artist

This project gave me the chance to muse over the evolution of Vocaloid fan culture through the 13 years I've been there - Hey, that's half of my life! Isn't that wild!



@c4tc0r3

@c4tc0r3

DragDraws.Page Artist

Oh I've heard vocaloid covers since young but I've only recently started listening to the originals and a whole lot more this year, the Kagamines are my favorites and they have cheered me up with their silliness during some harsh times this year

@DDrawsb

@drag.draws

@dragdraws-art

rosetintedart.Page Artist

@rosetintedart_

@rosetintedart

@rosetintedart

eruukurage.Page Artist

It all started when I stumbled upon a video titled Kokoro sung by Kagamine Rin and my whole life changed.

@eruukurage

tasphizia.Page Artist

I've loved Vocaloid since I was nine, the songs have really gotten me through the hardest years in my life, and I adore writing lyrics for the Vocaloid band I'm a part of, Kiru-Kiru!

linktr.ee/tasphizia @tasphizia @tasphizia tasphizia.carrd.co

Beavily.Page Artist

Vocaloid was always there for me when I was younger, I loved the songs and the designs and even tho I distand myself from this world I still love it and have a lot of happy memories with it <3

@Beavily_ @Beavily @Beavily_

Lys.Page Artist

My first time discovering Vocaloid and its community was in 3rd grade, and it encouraged me to learn many things from drawing, studying English, Japanese, as well as singing. It's truly not an exaggeration to say that without Vocaloid, I wouldn't be who I am now! I'm very happy to know that Vocaloid is still as loved as it was years ago.

@gokigenlys @lystrashcamd @lystrashcamd

brbaltering.Page Artist

@brbaltering

@brbaltering

Natalie Haku.Page Artist

I've loved Vocaloid since 2010- I've used the same art handle since then, which was inspired by Yowane Haku! I hope I continue to meet amazing people and take part in community projects through Vocaloid in the future! <3

@NatalieHaku @NatalieHaku @NatalieHaku @NatalieHaku

kupoccino.Page Artist

@kupoccino

@kupoccino

Loupl.Page Artist

@loup.glouglou

星空★lone.Page Artist

@inkopolis

Spinach Square.Page Artist

@spinachsquare

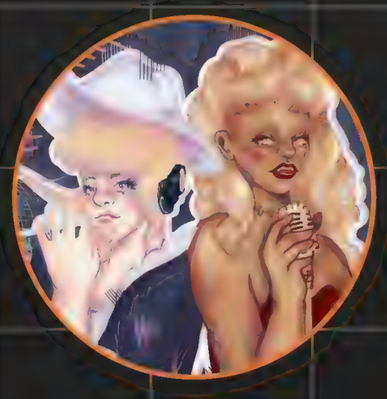
spinachsquare.carrd.co

@spinachsquare

meowonaise.Page Artist

@meowonaise

@meowonaise



pukeprinceart.Page Artist

@pukeprinceart

Azu.Writer

The themes and eccentricities of Vocaloid changed my life. I will never enter a universe as unique as Vocaloid again in my life!

@aurumetis

V | teamJNPR.Writer

Vocaloid and the music of so many talented creators was my first foray into the world of fandom, and from there, fanfiction. I loved Miku and Luka so much that I wanted to try writing something myself. Over a decade later, and here we are!

fanfiction.net @team JNPR

AO3 @team JNPR

V | Gray Voice.Writer

fanfiction.net @Gray Voice

AO3 @Gray Voice

V | kuri.Writer

Vocaloid has always meant “expression” to me. I love it with all my heart, and I hope that everyone can find that same sort of joy, solace, or catharsis from it. With all the new talent coming out of the Vocaloid scene, it’s never been a better time to be a fan!

@kuricovers

@kuricovers

AO3 / kuriwrites

V | afterreign.Writer

While my first introduction to VOCALOID was through Miku, my introduction to Piko was most memorable. When I first saw him on Vocaloid Wiki, he really stood out to me due to his impressive vocal range and heterochromatic eyes. I remember scouring through YouTube for any originals or covers he was in that I could get my hands on... Piko has been my absolute favorite since then. I am forever grateful for the Piko content VOCALOID fans bring to the table, especially when I see how loved he is by people to this day!

AO3 @afterreign

@afterreign

@afterreign

@afterreign

V | Hetaari.Writer

Can’t believe it’s been 12 years since I found Vocaloid...insane. Time flies, huh? Still not normal about Kaito and Len all these years later, though, but that’s a-ok!

@hetaari

AO3 / Hetaari

V | Specter.Writer

“You deaf? They asked for an encore, are we gonna deliver or not?” Len spoke with a smile. Rin cheered and hugged Len, and the rest of the gang followed suit. They had little time to waste, after all, they had an encore to do.

IdrewAcow.Writer

Vocaloid has been a huge part of my creative life for over a decade now! While originally it was a huge inspiration, the fire to my creative process, now it's like an old friend that I'll always cherish.

fanfiction.net @IdrewAcow

AO3 @IdrewAcow

@IdrewAcow

Ripple.Writing Mod

Vocaloid has always been a major part of my life. It has helped me through some tough times and I made some fond memories with friends from this cozy fandom. Becoming a producer and writer is my way of expressing my love for it and giving back, and I hope to create more memories!

ripple-p.carrd.co

@ripplyv4xsolid

@ _rxpple

AO3 @Wings_Of_Innocence

MelloWammy.Merch Mod

Vocaloid has been a big part of my life since I was in middle school! I still remember the first song I listened to being Bad End Night and the Kagerou Project series solidifying IA as my favorite! It's one of the few pieces of inspiration that's made me who I am today! <3

mellowammy.carrd.co

@mellowammy

@mellowammy

@mw-arts

Kuno.Art Mod

I owe Vocaloid a lot for introducing me to a world of wonderful music, art, and creators! It is simply amazing how one piece of technology has inspired so many different forms of self-expression. Happy birthday Vocaloid! I hope we can all keep creating for the years to come.

@Kunonofish

@Kunonofish

@Kunonofish

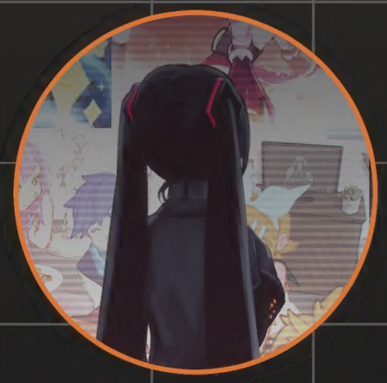
asterrism.Writing Mod

I'm a relatively recent Vocaloid fan, but I find it fascinating to look back on how Vocaloid has changed and grown since its creation. Every piece of "lore" I stumble across, every new (or not-so-new) song I listen to makes me love and respect it even more, I'm really happy to have been introduced to it.

@asterriism

@asterriism

@asterriism



Friendlily N.Organization Mod

All of the things I love—art, writing, and music, were brought together through Vocaloid, and I was able to explore them all in ways I couldn't have if Vocaloid never found me. Even if I become someone different in the future, part of it will stay with me wherever I go.

friendlily-n.carrd.co

@friendlily-n

@Friendlily_N

Special thanks to our friends:
◈ Lore ◈ Arte ◈ Crow ◈ Raye ◈ Ghosty

And all of the artists and writers who've made this zine possible!

VOCALOID NOSTALGIA ft.
JULY 12th • 2012